

## Of Trees and Silence

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## Of Trees and Silence

by [Searofyr](#)

### Summary

From the journal of Lothryn Simero, House Telvanni, Black Marsh 2E.

A Nerevarine, ignorant of his status and born way too early for his prophecy, lives the Telvanni hermit life and specialises in Restoration magic to achieve immortality. On a research excursion to Black Marsh, he instead finds many complications to his quiet life.

Partially and loosely follows the events of ESO Murkmire.

## Chapter 1

Can't locate my apprentice. That means she's off in some realm outside Tamriel or Nirn again. Either Sheogorath or the Psijics usually.

What do I have an apprentice for if she's always off somewhere when I need help with an experiment? There aren't as many people I trust to play the other controlling part in these. In fact there's only the one.

Fine, I'll wait. If it's the Psijics, it's my fault for dragging her there. Couldn't know they'd adopt her outright and she'd dig out her idealistic streak. Must be that island, something about it does that to people.

## Chapter 2

I finally found my apprentice.

She's back from a trip to Artaeum. Thought that was it. But here's the thing, turns out she was in fucking Coldharbour before that. Ending the Planemeld. Well, alright, I guess that constitutes a decent enough excuse for the absence.

Oh yeah, she does alright portals now, she *has* been learning. Only reliably to her own real estate, she says, but it's a start. Me, I still suck at portals, I still pay for them. Better than landing in the middle of the desert.

So this makes communication easier, too. She invited me to a half-furnished house in Windhelm that she's got with her husband now.

Oh yeah. She also got fucking married in the meantime, and she's a Tharn now. I really should look in on people more often. I'm starting to think I'm overdoing the typical Telvanni isolation and I'm missing out on a few minor details here and there.

The husband is a pompous ass, as expected from the reputation, but her and I both put up with our House, so neither of us can mind too much.

He asked me a bunch of intrusive and insolent questions, but then he was seemingly satisfied and offered wine. Good stuff, too. One of the reasons I like the Empire. (Can't say that too loudly at home.)

Also called me a hedge mage in passing.

Diesala said that he says that of all Telvanni mages including herself, and he thinks that's the founding principle of the House more or less.

He added that he married one so it can't be too bad.

I think he's alright. Probably.

So in any case, I proposed my new research idea, and Diesala said, of all things, that they were looking into soul magic too, but it has to wait because fucking Mannimarco killed her and stole her soul and now Molag Bal has it. She's currently some kind of undead Daedra and is looking to fix that.

I asked her when that was.

She said last year.

I really need to get out more.

So that's postponed, and I grudgingly offered them help with that soul business, they said they've got this for now but may need help with my specialties later. Hate to say it, but that's somehow

reassuring. People still needing you. Especially when one of them is actually your apprentice.

Last thing I should add. She brought me a Psijic wolf puppy from Artaeum. Said she does well with supernatural pet accompaniment and I should have one, too, and since I luckily don't need a feline vengeance ghost, I get this now.

I have no idea what this thing even *is*, she doesn't fully understand it yet either, even though she made it, but it's fascinating.

A wolf.

Apparently they have different types. What made her think of a wolf for me?

It's sitting next to my desk. I suppose I should give it a name.

## **I blame Imperials. All of them.**

So. We're all talking till late over too much wine on our research. The newlyweds agree that longer life is good, but immortality isn't for them. I knew that already from Diesala; good for her that her man agrees with her. But I'm looking for something more.

Incidentally, she could actually just stay immortal if she just gave up on her soul as a price, but neither's acceptable for her. She warned me, too, not to try what happened to her cause it's the worst apparently.

Well, I'll take her warning, coming from a first-hand source as it is, and she usually has her head on straight, as much as one of us ever does. Besides, can't be any good getting caught up with Molag Bal. Yeah. I think I'll pass on that one.

(Distant acquaintance of mine wants to go about it the Daedric pact way, also looking into Molag Bal's people for that. If I remember correctly, I called it an interesting but tremendously stupid idea. I should probably stick with my own judgment.)

So how does any of this land me here? Girl starts talking about Argonians and their apparently interesting magic and their alien attitudes on life and death. Turns out they've been on a short stint to Shadowfen and she talked to the Hist. (Sure, why not, add another ludicrous thing to the list. At least I picked a good one for an apprentice, or rather, agreed to have a good one foisted off on me, but same thing.)

Says she can't agree with the selfless fatalism of the people herself cause she's selfish and wants things to go her way (of course, that's part of why I agreed to sponsor her), but finds it interesting and touching, and something to keep in mind as the opposite of the kind of work we tend to get into. Balance. Well.

I was sceptical about looking to Argonians for inspiration, of all things.

She said they're really worthwhile, and I should pay attention to their sense of humour, and then she launched into a wine-enabled treatise on her dreams for an Empire that encompassed all known people of Tamriel, with everyone prosperous and living in peace and as equals, and yes, also Argonians. And by the way, she must tell me about the snake people she worked with in Coldharbour, "lovely people, if you can work around their bloodlust, but they understand honour and gratitude", and so on.

I said if we're incorporating fucking Lamia in our fictional Empire already, Argonians really aren't such a big deal.

She said, "See?"

I said, "And what does the former High Chancellor say about this?"

The former High Chancellor said he wasn't making those decisions anymore, and had other things on his plate, but if he was to decide and his dear wanted Lamia, there would be Lamia, and there's always a way to work something in.

Blame it on the wine, but that sounded kind of nice at that moment.

That all in my head, when I took care of some business and met another young Imperial lady who wanted help, I actually stopped to listen (just what is wrong with me?), and now I'm on some foolish expedition in Murkmire.

Yeah, I don't know either. I firmly blame the Imperials, and their too good wine, but mostly their talk.

Who knows, maybe I'll find some new ideas here; my work has been stunted since the last breakthrough.

p.s. Sadis is a good wolf. I'm getting used to him.

## **Ixtaxh Xanmeer.**

I'll leave the questions on what exactly I think I'm doing here to another time.

Explored an old building, and I'll say it's aesthetically and architecturally impressive.

The spiders were also impressive in a way, but not in one I appreciated. Good thing I didn't come here with my apprentice; she wouldn't have appreciated them either, not at all.

Taking in the sights and the air and solving puzzles was surprisingly fun, though. Like walking right into one of those dungeon delver adventure novels I enjoyed as a boy in the Temple. (I remember I'd disguise them as scripture. The priests always saw right through me.)

I didn't find anything useful. Why did I even think I would? But the group was vaguely amusing in its bumbling incompetence.

In the end before our undignified rescue we killed a murderous piece of slime.

This is not an insult or an image. It was a piece of slime.

## Chapter 5

But really, what am I doing here?



## Chapter 6

Of course I caught some swamp fever. Of course.

I won't bother with the details. But it was not only an unpleasant experience, I actually thought I was done for. Damned swamp, damned stinging little bastards, damned water swarming with unseen things.

Any lesser mage, or any mage less focused on innovative and particularly effective forms of restoration magic may have easily succumbed to this. As it was, I had to draw deeply from my well of magic and undo years of work I'd put into myself and building up a more youthful appearance to preserve through hopefully the ages. Wouldn't do me any good if I died here in a backwater inn, after all. Magic is sacrifice.

But I'm alive, and once I've got strength in me again, I'll walk out of this inn.

Not today, though. Not tomorrow, either. I'm sitting around reading, letting my thoughts wander, or just in a daze, getting used to the bizarre dishes they serve, and doing slight magical exercises again when I'm particularly lucid. Beginner's stuff. I know I'll get my reserves back up, but for now I'm drained, and I feel like I'm starting from the ground up.

It's only logical. I went to Sithis's door, and he demanded a tribute for letting me turn back instead of knocking. And Sithis is strong here through the oddly reverent faith of the locals.

Speaking of, I may have even prayed to Mara a few times. Haven't done *that* since my youth. The things nearly dying will do to you.

## Chapter 7

I seem to be coming out of this illness with a new trick or two. Earlier, in my boredom, I tried commanding a fly to do my bidding. It worked.

The healing process had me go through all the theories I'd last taught Diesala, diseases as swarms and all that, and she said she's been experimenting with that with some success.

Remembering that gave me the idea to try to command a swarm of more visible creatures. And I ended up ordering around a small group of flies. Well, three. As I said, I'm drained. But I directed them as a swarm, not as individuals. This is interesting. A more natural variation on some of the mind manipulation techniques the Dwemer used, perhaps. I should follow up on that. Perhaps learn more about the different creatures from the locals to gauge their potential.

## Chapter 8

I've recovered enough to walk outside, at least for a bit.

Magically I've been set back years. Here are some discoveries I've made instead:

- A Shadowscale lady of advanced years has been spending a lot of time at the inn that I've turned into my sick room. Took me a few days to strike up conversation with her. Maybe superstition about being taken straight back to Sithis's doorstep. She was courteous enough not to do that. In fact, she's fantastic. I could talk to her for hours, if lengthy conversations didn't still tire me out.

- I had plenty of opportunity to listen to their bards and their songs, right outside the inn. On good days I sit outside or stand at the railing listening. I'm starting to have their strange songs internalised. And Diesala was right. Everything is all about change and impermanence. Strange place for me to look when I'm looking for permanence, but if the obvious roads led to the obvious results, we'd all be immortal already.

- I've rekindled a somewhat embarrassing love of expedition and adventure novels. Really takes me back to my childhood in the Mara Temple in Cyrodiil. I never talk about it, but sometimes thinking back isn't so bad from a distance.

In any case, there's a series I've been following in particular. The spooky doomed unwise expedition genre. Seems the natives have their morbid fun with these, with their homeland being the setting that traps the foreigners stupid enough to set foot here.

... What am I doing here again?

## Chapter 9

Got a letter from my little apprentice. Handed over by a banekin she sent through a portal. Show-off. Left him there, too, to wait for my reply, since she said I'm no better at writing than she is and she wants to hear from me. She might be onto something there. So we sent the poor little guy back and forth a few times.

She says she's done with her soul business, got it all back, got her mortality back, too, so if we want to conduct experiments, she's theoretically up to it; oh and Molag Bal is no threat anymore for now either.

What do you even say to that except congratulations? I picked a good one, yeah.

Though her soulless condition before got me inspired in a different field of work now. Something like puppets but real, and not with a soul stolen but without one in the first place. Can that be done? I asked her to check with her Psijic friends. She says she doubts they'll want to hear about that. Might have a point there, too.

She's in Mournhold right now recovering, and then they're going to dissolve some households they've assembled and leave for Artaeum. Probably the smart thing to do.

Asks if I want any of her book collection sent to my hut while I'm here, cause they can drop by. (It's a *tower*. Just a young one. A *tower*.)

Asks how I'm liking Murkmire and the Argonians.

I told her I nearly died here and definitely not to come here with what's going around right now, but I'm getting attached to this place, and she was right. Told her I'll take any books she can spare. Including the unlikely ones. I need to branch out more.

And then I did something monumentally stupid and sentimental out of the moment.

I asked her, since she's dissolving households anyway, if she can head to my place and get to the money storage, still in the same place as always, and pay off the Argonians with whatever she finds there, and I sent liberation papers for them besides. And pay off my old assistant, too, and tell him I won't be back in a while, and he won't be needed anymore. (That guy always was shady.) And then hire someone else that seems trustworthy to her to watch over and care for the tower while I'm away. Those things need attention.

Stupid and sentimental it is, but in the end I had to. I'm all for conflicting loyalties, but I'm not one for conflicting guar shit, and that's what that was.

And I guess I'll be staying here a while.

Her response was quick; she said she'll take care of it, first she has an urgent visit to the Shivering Isles that can't wait till Artaeum, and then she'll get straight to it. Guess she's happy; guess that was a long time coming. Asked if I wanted her to tell Kalathys anything.

Hadn't thought of that. Good to have an apprentice. I told her while she's at it, she can tell him I won't be needing his paperwork augmentation services anymore, and to take 3000 gold from the stash to pay off the rest I owe him and compensate for the loss in the near future. Tell him to maybe invest it into a guar farm, that's what they do in his town, right?

She said she'll get that done, too, including the guar farm suggestion, saying he'll surely be thrilled to hear that. Added he's been getting into agriculture lately anyway, courtesy of his wife, so he just might do it. Now there's an image.

And said she'll make sure I can visit her on Artaeum whenever I want. She must be really happy with this.

I just made life a whole lot harder for myself. Research especially. But I still feel like it got easier. Maybe I'll feel a bit less heavy listening to the bard tonight.

## **Ethics, endlessly hampering research.**

Gradually feeling better, strength returning bit by bit; did some thinking.

Sent a letter to my apprentice. She answered with a projection, showing off again, but useful. So we could have a direct conversation, much better.

I asked her about my project. Asked her, “Now don’t get offended. It’s a simple question for my research. When you were without a soul. Would you say at that time you still had feelings and thoughts of your own, and you would have been someone who should have the rights of a full person?”

She stared at me through the projection and then she started laughing and didn’t stop for a while. “Yes, yes I would indeed say so.” Then she was laughing some more.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” I said.

“Are you still on that idea of the puppets? You know it’s ridiculous, don’t you?”

“Can’t know till I’ve tried.”

“But why?” She started laughing again. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“I never know why beforehand. Things fall into place. Or they fail.”

“So you just had the idea to make soulless puppets, and so you...”

“Well, I reckon it’s not very tactful to say you inspired it. But then I felt like I should try this anyway.”

She shook her head. “Do what you have to. Just... do me a favour. Don’t use any vestiges, soul-shriven, people with misplaced souls, or Daedra. I assure you they’re all terribly conscious and should have rights.”

“That’s a long list. Alright. I can stick with that.”

When she knows you’ve been listening to her, she thinks things over and gets cooperative. She did there, too. “I think what you want to avoid is a general ability to think. I don’t know how you’d suppress that or what you’d have to build. Well, I don’t even know what that’s for.”

“Neither do I. Just curiosity right now. Could be an income source.”

She snorted. “You know what kind of atrocity you’d let loose if you sold them, right? Think about the consequences.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“Good.”

“I’ll think about it.”

She shook her head. “So you haven’t thought about it. Please think about who would buy that kind of thing.”

Sometimes she seems to forget who's the apprentice here. But I suppose I'd better think this through, shouldn't I?

Add-on: Thought about it. Thought about the clientele. Think she may indeed have a point there.

## Chapter 11

Another projection from my apprentice, just as I was studying some maps for leaving the settlement on a first expedition. I asked, so soon? Turns out time works weirdly between Artaeum and here and it's been a while for her.

Reason for her calling on me?

She got to meet Sotha Sil and is just so happy about that.

I mentioned something to the effect of going through all the effort to get an Imperial apprentice and she still ends up being all about the Tribunal.

She countered that it's not effort when I barely had a choice in the matter and Kalathys delivered her to my doorstep. Also that as a child she wanted to grow up to be like the guy and this was really exciting.

I asked if that's why she wanted to join the Psijic Order.

She said maybe part of it.

In Diesala-understatement that means a large part of it.

Then she said I'd like him.

I said I highly doubt that.

She asked what I have against them.

I said, "Nothing in particular, and that one seems the most tolerable of the three. But I have my policy that's served me well: I stay out of the way of anything divine, and they stay out of mine. It's a good arrangement. Not about to break it anytime soon."

She shook her head, said "I maintain you'd like him."

I said, "And I maintain my distance."

Her projection looked so sad somehow, I felt compelled to add something, so I said, "Alright, if I ever do meet the guy, I'll be nice. Alright? For your sake."

She smiled and said thank you, and now I can't bring myself to regret that statement even though it's idiotic.

While I can still claim fever as chief guilty party, I wonder if this is what it's like to have a daughter. Seems like what others in that position describe. I've got no interest in marriage nor family nor calling anyone else family like some soppy idiots who're only waiting to be taken advantage of, but sometimes I wonder, is all.



## Chapter 12

I regained some of my strength, and helped my favourite Shadowscale Sulahkeesh with the sorting of a property dispute around town. The Brotherhood way. Did some investigating first, then her and Sithis decided on the most practical course of action.

I normally stay out of Sithis's way, more than any other divine's even, but there was nothing to disagree with here.

Also here's a woman who can make me laugh. If I was at all into Argonians... Good thing I'm not. Can't think of a worse idea.

Anyway, she gave me a new restoration staff as a reward for my help in double murder. I can appreciate the joke in that, too. And what do you know, it's good. Ancient, too, well kept, humming with strange energies if you know how to listen. I'll have to study it further.

But that was a lot of effort and excitement for my condition, and I'm not feeling too great. May have to call it a night, in the middle of the afternoon.

Sithis may have let me go that time, but the reminders sure take their time to fade.

## Chapter 13

It's raining, and that has a way of turning my mood as dark and muddy as all that mud out there.

Why did I think a swamp called the Black Marsh was a good idea again?

Fuck it, the question won't answer itself no matter how often I ask it.

Neither will that other one.

Thematically sound: That guy outside is braving the rain to court his lady with the worst pick-up lines I have ever heard, bar none, and I've heard a lot. Eyes like puddles of mud. And he's getting away with it. I still haven't figured out if it's cause they're Argonians and she's honestly thrilled about that comparison, or if it's cause she's really into him and he's the kind of lucky bastard who could get away with anything as long as he's making the moves on her somehow.

Meanwhile the question I ask myself sometimes, when I care to look or I don't have the energy to look away, is, what's wrong with me?

## Chapter 14

Should have stayed sick for longer.

Met up with Xukas, bright colours, colourful language, shadier than a Riften salesman of love potions.

Wants me to help him out with an infiltration mission to get information on a group that's been targeting that cute Imperial girl I've been helping out. Which makes me feel the slightest bit like I could bother. But how in Mara's name does he think I'd be any good at infiltration? And to top it off, he wants nobody killed while we're at it cause it induces 'headaches'.

I tried to tell him, I told him, listen beeko, I don't infiltrate, and I don't sneak, and I certainly don't infiltrate or sneak well enough to get away with not killing people. If you're not doing it yourself, you deal with the headache and the corpses.

I also told him if he wants information, he should try with a truth serum. I've been semi-successful at brewing them.

They do tend to bring out the truth.

The erratic part is what truth.

Best case so far, I've used it to get a rival's levitation spell, and he not only told me but wrote it down in exact detail, and it worked, too. We had a good laugh about it afterwards, and I helped him improve it. Unfortunately I'm not talented at it; I get a few centimetres above ground, and then I'm done. Not very helpful. Will need a lot more work.

Worst case so far, I've used it to try to get a rival's cure for a fever sickness that made the rounds. The potion completely wiped out the fellow's memory of his cure, but he told me all about why his wife didn't understand him, especially in bedroom matters, and Gwenna was the only one who did. Then I found out who Gwenna was.

On second thought, I'll give this infiltration idea a try.

## Chapter 15

Fucking –

What in Oblivion was that?

So I was *trying* to write that my infiltration was successful and they had this incredibly flattering dossier about me suggesting that they send at least 20 men if they want to abduct me. I don't know where they got that from, but a reputation's a reputation. Handing that in was pretty funny and pretty stupid at the same time.

Now I'm set on another trail to get the abducted people back. I was starting to think this isn't my problem anymore, but Imperials pay well, and I need to finance this adventure, and I've had some heavy losses lately and an extended period of illness.

So as I was sitting here at the counter in the Lusty Argonian Footman writing this, there was a crack in the sky, and in the fabric of reality it seems, and then this light, and something like thunder but much worse. Along with one of the worst headaches I've ever had.

Wasn't alone either, judging by the other people here.

Then I was out.

Came to around the same time as everyone else. It's night now. It was bright daylight just earlier. Heavy rain outside, too.

I have an idea what this was. This is potentially really bad.

My memory is hazy, too. Not on everything, just a few things. Trying to think of some people is difficult cause everything gets overlayed, and I don't know what the truth is anymore.

I think I need a drink.

And, again I'm not the only one.

## Chapter 16

Well, work stops for no one and nothing, not even for supposed dragon breaks. (I'm not blind and clueless, you know.)

Xukas and I are about to meet a deadly temperamental naga named Jaxsik-Orn.

To sum up Xukas's advice, I'm supposed to scratch her chin just right, with a breeze-light touch.

## Chapter 17

Ended up foregoing that particular advice from Xukas. As expected, she didn't seem the type to appreciate chin-scratching, breeze-light touch or no. Better not to try.

First of all though, we had to track her cause she ran away after Xukas made his collaboration proposal.

Now when Xukas says something is an easy tracking job, he's probably referring to people who know the first thing about tracking anything. In a swamp. Look beeko, the only times I wandered into swamps, or nature in general before was to get plants for potions, otherwise I stayed well away. If I need people or food brought to me, I pay. If you want to rely on me for that kind of thing, you might as well rely on a courtier; wouldn't get you much worse results.

Somehow we managed to track her down anyway. Not thanks to my skills, that's for sure.

Jaxsik-Orrn isn't much for talk and a lot for killing. Forget the breeze-light touch, unfortunate metaphors all aside; the way to get her to listen is to shut up and sabotage a bandit camp.

She has the very likeable trait of not asking for subtlety or no deaths, either. I did manage it that time for Xukas, got a bounty but those guys were too apathetic to seriously try to stop me. Sheer luck. He was pleased enough, too, so alright. Just that once.

Jaxsik doesn't care about obstacles like corpse-avoidance, as long as a lot of things are on fire afterwards, and that made work a whole lot easier. I'm a mage, burning things I can do.

They managed to capture some bandit, I don't know if it was a leader, of course she pretended to have nothing to do with any of that, and a daughter to feed.

Jaxsik and I agreed she was obviously lying, and Jaxsik brought up some compelling fish comparisons to state her point that she should die.

I quite agreed.

I also told the woman if she doesn't want her daughter to be an orphan, how about not breaking the law?

(I know, hypocrisy, but I calculate my risks, I don't have a daughter, and my possibly sort of surrogate-daughter is successfully placed into the care of the Psijic Order and a politician husband, and is a necromancer. She'll be fine even if I mess up.)

Xukas was arguing for some scheme where we release her to let her scare the others, but that's too much random chance and relying on a lying bandit, and assumes people like that get scared in the first place, and when you prove you *don't* have the stomach to kill them, to boot.

I told Jaxsik she had the right of it, and the bandit is now deceased. Jaxsik likes me now. I mean, I'm interpreting her words that way. But I reckon being told I've shown my naga heart is pretty good from a naga.

Tomorrow I'm handing in my mission report and the substantial bill for all this.

Tonight I need sleep. Honestly this was a good distraction. Focus on something concrete. When I don't have that, my mind is still playing tricks on me and making me unsure if people in my life lived or died, and then there are completely nonsensical fake memories entering the picture.

I don't normally drink much, but I may hit the local special again tonight to knock myself out enough to fall asleep.

## Chapter 18

It was already late and I was already rather drunk when I got a surprise visit by my apprentice. She showed up in the inn, via portal, and just looked at me and started to cry.

Took me a moment to put two and two together. Of course, Diesala's a Psijic mage, and they deal with watching time and watching out that dragon breaks *don't* happen. She'd know what was going on. I waved her over, and then it was awkward, neither of us is good with this sort of thing, but I was just drunk enough to hug her and tell her it's alright and I'm alive and here, and so's she. She clung to me and cried some more.

Then it turned out I'd only put two and one together. When she finally spoke, all quietly so as not to be overheard, she said this had partly been her work. Figure that.

Together with Salyn Darovi, who's Kalathys's cousin and Sotha Sil's lover (the world is small), and whose idea it had been. He'd talked her into it, she'd talked Loremaster Celarus into helping. She explained some more details, but I'm too tired to write all that down.

I told her I'm proud of her – talking the Loremaster of the Psijic Order into a dragon break, quite a feat, maybe she ought to have become Empress after all.

I also said, "I confess to disappointment when you joined them and I thought you'd be on a boring track now and they'd stifle you and your curiosity, thought I'd made a mistake. Seems I was wrong. That's plenty interesting. But what for actually?"

She smiled and sniffed. "Saving Sotha Sil. Seemed the only option with a chance of success. Now the future is a blur, it seems, so we must have accomplished something."

Again with the divines, and again with that guy. "You'd go that far?"

She looked like she does when she's looking for excuses, but then she just shrugged. "I wanted to. I like him. And I was sympathetic to Salyn. Kindred spirit maybe. And..." She gave a little sheepish smile. "On some level I'll admit I wanted to do something interesting, too."

"That's my girl." Then I sighed. "I'll have to keep that in mind, huh. So those two are important to you?"

She nodded. "We haven't spent that much time together, but I like them."

"Well, as long as you don't drag me to a Tribunal temple to mend my ways, I guess it's alright. By the way. Do you have an idea if Kalathys lives? My memory can't be relied on anymore in that matter."

She swallowed and got really uneasy.

"Dead, huh."

"No... No, he lives. He died in Salyn's timeline, but in this combined one he's alive. He lived for you and me, and another."

That was a relief. "So we're in a combined timeline now? How many? Do you know?"

"Three. And you never know from where there's potential influence, but the conscious effort was



to combine three compatible ones into one. Now it's one."

"Alright. But if he's alive, why are you so upset?"

"I..." She bit her lip.

"Come on, out with it. You've long surpassed me, but I'm still your teacher."

She whispered then, "I almost lost you. I didn't realise. I was too hasty. I worked with the assumption that if two out of three timelines have something in common, that wins out. Normally that seems to be the case. You're not. And I didn't check. I'm... I'm really sorry."

Oh. I awkwardly hugged her again. "It's alright. I'm here. And you've got to focus on what's important in your life now. You acted in the moment and got what you wanted. That's good."

She was shaking. Doesn't normally like to be seen like this, but I guess this is a special case. Surrounding a dragon break you can act out, cause everyone does. I pet her hair. "So, take it I'm dead in the other two?"

"No. You never existed. There is no record of you. Not an alternate version either. Salyn was a woman in one timeline, the one neither of us is from, but found easily enough. I didn't tell him; I was afraid he'd get spooked and wouldn't go through with this if he knew, and by then I was invested, too."

I snorted. "That's my girl again. And, what's he now? She?"

"He. Two against one. See... If I'd paid enough attention and found out beforehand, I couldn't have done it. You just don't exist in the other ones."

That was quite a bit to take in, I'll admit. Best and most healthy response: Don't think about it, deflect with a joke. "So I reckon I'm some anomaly and shouldn't exist, somehow the Divines got something wrong. And now some hapless proper person who should've been in my place is gone. Look what you've done. Might've doomed us all."

She smiled, a shaky smile. "There may be truth to that, you know. But maybe you stayed because you're the kind of anomaly that the world wanted. It does that, you know."

"Right. Like I'd contribute anything of value."

"So you're not mad at me?"

"Of course I'm not mad at you. You've got to do your own work. You can be my surrogate daughter all you want, but you've got to focus on *your* life and goals. I'll be alright. See? I *am* alright. Even with two against one on me existing." My excuse is I was pretty drunk and not used to a lot of the stuff.

Her eyes got big, and then she hugged me again. "I'll take it."

"Oh, damn. What have I done now?" I hugged her back again. Dragon break and alcohol.

"Alright."

She looked at me and smiled. "Does that make you Sheogorath's brother then? With him as my adopted uncle."

"Let's not take it too far."

Since we both agreed that that was quite enough maudlin emotion and truth-confessions for one evening, or really for a lifetime, I ordered us both a round of house special. “Can you portal home drunk, or do you need a room?”

“I’ll take a room,” she said. “Abnur knows. And I want to see Murkmire now.”

“No Psijic stuff to do, in the aftermath of all this?”

“They can spare me for a few days, or whatever that’ll be with how differently time runs.” She pursed her lips. “Seeing my surrogate family is also important. Let me just send a message.”

And she summoned a fucking banekin in the middle of the inn and gave him her message, and sent him off through another portal. People had been plenty distracted with sorting their own business before, or with getting drunk enough to forget their own business. But that sure got us attention.

Gifted students can be a curse.

## Chapter 19

She's gone again. Was nice to have her here for a few days.

I showed her around Lilmoth, took her to the Imperials and the imperialised Argonian; I had to hand in my report anyway. Of course they got along. Diesala's not much for starting small-talk, better than me, but that's not saying much, but those people are used to entertaining hesitant visitors, so soon they were chatting about their adventures in Argonian ruins.

She wanted to study that trinket we'd gotten from the one ruin, and later said to me she found the Argon business terribly interesting, but she'll have to deal with Psijic matters as soon as she gets back, and she already only got these few days off cause she'd been convinced I was dead (or rather, taken out of existence altogether) and it was her fault and she'd made quite the upset display about that. I'm honestly touched she cares so much.

In any case she said if I followed that lead, I might find something fascinating, and to tell her about it if I did. I promised I would.

She was surprised to hear I'd rescued adventurers from bandits; I said I was, too, but Imperials paid well, and I'm badly in need of funds. She said that reassured her. But she's not buying it all, I can see.

Have I changed? Maybe a bit.

She loves Lilmoth, likes the region much better than Shadowfen, and doesn't love the various bugs at all, as expected.

We didn't venture further out into the swamp; her constitution's almost as weak as mine, and we don't need her catching what I had, or one of the million other available illnesses. And she doesn't have my kind of magicka reserves either, nor my experience in restoration magic. Though I have to say, since she's been fully involved in the Psijic order, her magical progress has been impressive. It always was, but this is different. She'll match those old Altmer guys sooner or later.

One evening over drinks in the Footman, she asked if I had any friends. I had to think about that.

"I have you," I said.

"Besides me."

"I had that business relationship with Kalathys. But I don't know if he's still talking to me now that that's cancelled. Maybe if he raises guar after all and I buy those."

Diesala laughed but it was a sad kind of laugh.

"What's this about?" I asked.

She looked at me all serious. "Sooner or later I'll die. Not soon, I hope, and we're with the Psijic order now, Abnur and I, that does tend to prolong your lifespan. Even for Imperials. There's one there... Anyway. Eventually I'll die, it's what I've wanted, and what I've fought for. I want

mortality and an afterlife. But you...”

She has that habit of keeping the unpleasant truths on her mind and talking about them as if it was natural. Maybe it is to her.

“Well I had two close calls just now,” I said. Deflect first. What else could I do?

“And you survived both. I...” She huffed, like she was annoyed I made her explain herself. Probably was. She’s good with the unpleasant truths but bad with the emotional consequences of them, we’re not that dissimilar after all.

“You’re studying immortality,” she started over. “And honestly...” She cleared her throat. “You’re brilliant. You’ll probably succeed. And I want you to. I just don’t want you to be lonely when I’m gone.”

This was even heavier than what I’d feared. Supposed I owed her a bit of honesty in turn after all. “Well I’ll be sad when you’re gone. Of course I’ll be lonely. One can’t just replace you. But if you’re sure that’s what you want, you’ve got to do that.” I thought about how much more to say. I hate talking about my childhood. But sometimes you have to. “It’s your Imperial faith, right? And your whole Alessian pride, in humanity, and the right order of things... right?”

She nodded.

“I was raised in that.”

I swear, she looked more shocked at that than at some of the experiments she’s seen in my tower. “You? Alessian?” She took a sip from her drink like you do to calm your nerves.

Now there was no way out anymore. “Well, I was raised in Cyrodiil. In a Temple of Mara.”

She choked on her drink.

“Sorry,” I said.

She shook her head. Cleared her throat. “You. In a Temple of Mara.” Then she started laughing.

“I know, biggest joke there is, isn’t it? My parents dropped me off there when I was a baby. I never knew them. I suppose, the goddess of love and family is where you drop off an unwanted child. Somehow I never got good at the love and family stuff. Couldn’t bear it after a while, so when I was grown up, I left and went to Morrowind, and joined House Telvanni. Seemed more my thing. Like that’s where I belonged. Nature and temperament and so on. But...” I was talking a lot now. More than I’d thought I would. “Point is, I learned it all. And some things stick. So I know why you want to be mortal and, I don’t know, probably go to Aetherius with your equally Alessian husband, and...”

“I’ve been wondering about Sovngarde, too,” she said.

This time I was the one laughing. “You? And him? In Sovngarde? That I want to see.”

She grinned at that. “I know. But...”

“Shezarr’s place. Is that it?”

“It is. You know, the third one that was involved in this...” She lowered her voice. “The dragon break. The third that had his soul taken. I haven’t met him yet, but Salyn wants to introduce us. He

said another version of me had known him. He's really close with, well, to him it's Lorkhan, and he's currently using some kind of snake aspect to talk to him. Some ghost snake."

"Like those Ashlanders," I said.

Her eyes lit up. "You know them? I met their ghost snake! Different from Shezarr, I'm quite sure, but..."

"I met them, yeah, I was passing through. Needed supplies, and that Hlaalu trader fellow was helping me out. The one you installed. Then that lady announces their ghost snake wants to meet me. I took that to mean they want the ghost snake to eat me, but he did just want to talk. I still don't know what it was about in the end, it was a weird conversation. Anyway, the snake was alright, but I usually stay away from Ashlanders, too. Too political, too fanatic, and their myths... They just make me uncomfortable."

She had a strange look on her face then, looking me over, and I could see her thinking, I just have no idea what in Oblivion she was thinking about. She was clutching her cup, too.

After a long silence, she said, "Promise me to meet me on Artaeum. And I'll introduce you to some people."

"Is it any good asking what this is about?"

She gritted her teeth, then said, "As I said. You'll probably succeed. You need to know a few more long-lived or immortal people." She looked away. "Salyn is immortal. He made a different decision from mine when he got his soul back."

"And I suppose so is his... How do you phrase that politely when it's a god?"

"That remains to be seen. Hopefully."

"You really want me to meet them, don't you?"

"I do."

I sighed. "Fine. For you. And will you tell me what the ghost snake has to do with that?"

She shook her head.

I had to laugh. "Alright. I'm a Telvanni, I bring in an apprentice, means I'll raise a schemer. Too late to complain now."

"You'll thank me. I think. Perhaps."

"Well, in that case, I appreciate the gesture at least. Another round? You know, when you're back at work, I'll need to lay off this stuff again."

"Oh, so will I. This is vacation." She was starting to look and sound more relaxed again. So she'd achieved what she wanted to. Like she tends to.

I tried to pick out the strands that roundabout conversation had left loose, but the house special blurred them bit by bit. This is why I shouldn't drink.



## Chapter 20

I'm down with another fever.

Think this'll be a regular occurrence while I'm here. It's bad enough at home in Vvardenfell, this here is a swamp *and* an area I'm not used to at all.

At least I don't feel like I'll be dying from this one. Not literally anyway.

I'm letting it run its course. Sometimes you need to if you want to get used to an area at all. That and I'm too exhausted to even get out the magic.

## Chapter 21

Here's a problem with fevers, including the ones that don't kill you: The fever dreams. Getting weirder and weirder.

Some fairly vivid stuff with Almalexia, and Divines only know where that came from. Vivid and explicit. Why. I don't deal with deities. I don't want to deal with deities. Not in that way either. Not even if they'd more or less fall into my type if they were mortal. Woke up feeling for the worse each time.

Some days in, those dreams ceased, and there was confusing stuff with snakes instead. Better. Reminiscent of the stuff I saw after that Argonian concoction I tried a while back here, made about as much sense, but at least snakes are neutral territory. (Not for all people, but I'm as far from a devout Redguard as they come, so I don't care.)

Here's a problem with lifting fevers: That state when you're still devoid of all energy, but just feeling antsy enough to have to do something, anything, but you can't, and you know you shouldn't, so you read and think too much, or you don't think and do something stupid in your room. I ended up drawing on my hand, scribbles, nonsensical, then I connected them into a mess of snakes. Then I obsessively had to improve it. With my non-existent talent for drawing, improvement is a very relative term. Then I wanted to try how magical tattoos worked cause I'd just read about that in a book lying around the inn's main room. Made them sink into my skin. Now there they were swirling around my hand and wrist, looking more like irregular strings of rope honestly but it's the intent that counts, right?

What intent? I have no idea.

Here's the problem with staying at inns and becoming a known face: People notice your bad tattoo decisions.

Follow-up problem: When you're finally restored and have enough lucidity back to decide this was a really stupid idea and use some improvised restoration magic and controlling the mostly-lifeless swarm of ink and colour to remove it again, people notice, too.

Led to this young Imperial woman asking for my help. And I know I'm weak to that. She was too embarrassed to talk about it in front of people, but she'd seen me with and without the tattoo, and asked around and heard I was a mage and did some restoration. She looked doubtful at that.

I told her I'd be doubting it too with how I'm more down with illnesses than healthy, but I did deal in that.

She asked if I could remove something for her. She couldn't say what it was, and if we could talk in my room.

I said, "Look, if this is some kind of..."

She got all flustered. "No, no, it's not, I got... I really can't talk about it."



I sighed and agreed.

She really did have a problem. Of the embarrassing tattoo kind.

I replicated what I'd done to myself earlier, and removed it, and it worked out a little more smoothly this time, and she was relieved and close to tears cause now she could see her lover again. I pity that guy. But as I may have mentioned before, Imperials pay well, and I need the gold.

Just a question. Into empty space as this is just a journal after all.

Why is it always Mephala?

I know, of course, sex and murder, appealing combination, and I shouldn't say too much with how I always find myself drawn to the worst possible type myself. But this is where you employ reason, children. That last bit of reason in the back of your head, if need be, if the situation has proceeded too far already. That mostly-drowned-out tiny voice inside of you that tells you to get the fuck out. It may save your life, or at least it may save you from embarrassing tattoos.

But you know what, I kind of liked these snakes. I wonder if someone else can draw a better version.

## Chapter 22

I got a letter from Kalathys today.

I'll just pin it in here in its entirety for the remarkable brazenness of that mer.

“Lothryn,

Of course I've gotten the news and the money from Diesala by now. That was generous; you did not have to do that. I know you're always out of gold, and you did not owe me anything more than the small sum you settled. With the extra funds, in addition to our own savings, Llurah and I can indeed start a new life. (No, not a guar farm. Thank you for asking. But a farm, yes. You may laugh, but we're starting small in vegetables. A cousin has useful advice in the field.)

I hate having to ask for another favour, but it concerns my niece, Naronah. My brother's daughter. She's fatally ill, and nobody has been able to help her. The Temple healers are at their wits' end, so are those of the Mages Guild.

My brother and I were estranged but have recently been talking again, and he has asked me for advice.

I told him there are three very good mages I know that I trust and that are different in their methods.

One is Diesala, of course. He disliked the idea of a Psijic mage, saying they're a bunch of Altmer who tried to rule over everything from their prissy island. (Soravul, my brother, he's got his own views. One could say he is very patriotic about the Pact. You'll see.) I thought it wise not to mention the Necromancy for now, in case he changes his mind.

One is our cousin Salyn, who's not a healer however. Have you met him? Diesala has befriended him recently; it's a small world, isn't it? He started out unremarkable in his youth, smart but irresponsible and timid, but has made a name of himself in Morrowind since and disappeared to Clockwork City. Diesala said he has a leading position of some kind outside the usual structures and is involved with Sotha Sil if you can believe that. I remember him disliking the Tribunal, but I suppose he's grown up. That and I suppose Clockwork City is good for a mage, lots of tinkering to do and lots of structure and order. You hear little, but you hear they tend to domesticate the restless ones there. Seems that's what he needed. No wonder growing up without parents. The Akaviri invasion has taken a lot from us all, so have all the other wars.

In any case, Soravul was for that idea, and prefers to stay within our own House (he's very patriotic about that, too), but I warned him that he should try a specialised healer first, and that our cousin's specialty lies in Daedra and who knows what they do in Clockwork City now. So that plan is on hold but not off the table.

Here I'd like to pause for a personal note.

I trust the good intentions of both our mutual friend and my cousin. But this is my niece we're talking about.

I never got to see much of Naronah as she grew up, but she's 17 now, and as sweet a girl as you will find. I don't want my brother to turn to Necromancy, time magic or Daedric pacts or to have her replaced by machines. You're a healer, you must know what desperate parents are capable of. His marriage is suffering already. (His wife, Sethes, is much more down to earth, though I never approved of her in the past.)

Here's where you come in.

Of course you're the third mage I mentioned. I said you were a true friend of House Dres (as you are) and that you were the best Restoration mage I knew. And that if all else fails, for certain things you simply had to turn to House Telvanni.

He was sceptical.

I told him what Diesala told me, that you were currently in Black Marsh researching Argonian magic undiscovered by the civilised races and hoping to augment your craft that way. And that if anyone could manage this task, it was you.

He was still sceptical but more willing to listen.

He is now in Shadowfen. Stormhold, to be exact.

If I could sigh through the paper, you would hear it.

He asked around for Argonian magic to heal his dying daughter. The Argonians told him to accept the finality of this life and to let her move on, and some nonsense about the river.

He's currently not happy with me.

Could you meet him in Stormhold and find out what's wrong, check out my niece and find if there's something, anything you can do for her that doesn't involve Daedra? And if you could hurry it up and take portals back and forth... I have attached funds for a few times. I worry what he'll turn to once he's had enough of trying for sensible options.

Ask for Soravul and Sethes Elaru of House Dres, or their daughter Naronah, they're all there. (He actually took his ailing daughter to the swamp, can you believe it?)

I'd be most obliged.

Your friend

Kalathys"

## Chapter 23

A few scattered thoughts for now.

You get people to trust you, this is what you get for it.

For the hermit I am, I sure surround myself with people who like to gossip.

Why does everything always come down to House Dres?

House Dres has a communal habit of not only not accepting no for an answer but not even considering nor giving you the opportunity to consider that no might be a possible answer. Occasionally intriguing in a lover, inconvenient in anyone else.

Yet I'm still going to go, aren't I? I'm part of the problem, I recognise.

Look, if I can do something as worthwhile as saving a little Dunmer girl who's my friend's niece (yes, I recognise the timing at which he calls me up and calls me his friend after I terminated our business relationship), I should.

Funny how someone who knows me reasonably well should trust me with something important like that.

Funny to compare with what I've actually been doing here since I got here. Succumbed to fevers twice, dungeon-delved with a few incompetent adventurers for excitement and trinkets, helped murder some people, and for the actual healing part, removed a few tattoos.

(That girl painted me as this shady but nice-enough outsider you can go to. You get the reputation once, they start lining up for all the most embarrassing ones. It pays the living expenses, but it's still not quite the mystical Argonian magic that will defy death that both I and this poor Dres father are hoping for.)

Fine, I'll go. At least check on her, who knows, maybe I'll know what to do and the healers they've talked to were all just incompetent.

## Chapter 24

So Stormhold.

Afforded a portal at the Mages Guild, and arrived at theirs, in the basement of a nice fancy ruin. If Lilmoth had a few nice fancy ruins, that'd sure be better for storing books. I mean old ruins of the Ayleid kind, the ones that'll actually keep and that'll probably still be standing in a few eras.

The people at the guild were curious what brought me there, and one Argonian mage, Dries-The-Pages, was wary when she heard I was of House Telvanni. Pure prejudice; I stopped working with Argonian slaves weeks ago.

I told them of the girl I was sent to cure, and asked around for Soravul or Sethes, and of course they've been here, and they're staying at an inn room. Soravul appears to have made quite a scene at the guild, not winning himself any friends in the process.

Him being of House Dres, of course Dries-The-Pages didn't trust him anyway. Again, pure prejudice; his brother stopped trading in Argonian slaves weeks ago. (That said, Kalathys never mentioned what Soravul and Sethes do for a living. Not that it matters when it comes to saving their daughter.)

She got more helpful when she heard I'd been helping out in Murkmire until I got here. Told me some places in town they tend to be during the day, told me what places to go to and which to avoid, and to especially avoid the inn if I was going to stay overnight. You can rent or even buy little huts outside of town if you're not afraid of a little swamp, she said, and added, "There are always bugs, but some are cleaner than others." I took her warning to heart and rented a hut.

On my way through town I noticed there's a cornerclub here. Maybe an old relic, maybe a new arrival since the Pact. Depending on how the day goes, I might have a look at that later.

## Chapter 25

No trace of the family yet. This may take a while.

I asked at the guild if it was alright and safe to bring my Psijic wolf puppy through the portal next time. Since I was worried and left him in Lilmoth for tonight, but if I'll be here for longer, I don't want to do that.

That got some attention from the present mages, so I had to explain about Sadis and that my apprentice had made him for me.

Dries-The-Pages raised the crest on her head in a kind of askew manner. "Your apprentice made you a Psijic animal?"

"She's way surpassed me," I said, "she's in the Psijic order now."

"An apprentice in the Psijic order. Looks like you're not just any Telvanni mage."

"Oh, I really am," I said.

She gave a cackling laugh at that.

In any case, Sadis is not only welcome, they insist I bring him. This makes things a lot easier.

## Chapter 26

I asked around this stupid down and looked at any place that seemed to make sense, but nothing.

As it turned evening, my thoughts wandered back to the cornerclub.

They wouldn't, would they? Not in this situation? But from another angle, Dunmer are Dunmer, and in some situations you still at least need a drink. And maybe someone particularly proud of his House would want to be around people of his race, too. And where else would you be?

So I sighed and entered the Murky Silence Club. Some kind of poet at work here, it seems. Pretensions dribble for a bit of entertainment, I thought, it's not like you're joining a cult.

As I walked in, it was barely lit, and there was a sign standing on the counter saying "NO NAMES" in big letters. Seemed I was wrong.

The small print on the sign said, "The Murky Silence Club is a peaceful club for all members of the Pact to enjoy. Therefore, please abide by the 'no names' policy, and exercise discretion."

A poet and a well-intentioned modern idiot.

Of course, I can see how in Black Marsh, in a former enclave of the slave trade, this could be sound business policy and prevent some drunken fights or scenes. Still. If, say, an Argonian walks into a Dunmer cornerclub, they should have the sense to know they might encounter someone with a last name their family might not approve of. If there's anything Murkmire has taught me so far, it's that they generally know what they're doing, have minds of their own, and shouldn't be coddled like children.

Well. Not my club.

Or, I mused, I had it all wrong, and this was a pleasant front for a more typical policy for the protection of reputations and marriages. If so, I could respect that. Still damned inconvenient when you're looking for someone, though.

I saw pairs of eyes on me. Mostly Dunmer, some Argonians, one Nord. Great, attention. Just what I was in the mood for.

I stepped up to the counter, where a heavysset Dunmer gentleman greeted me.

"Good evening. I have a somewhat difficult request," I said.

He grinned. "We hear that a lot."

Of course. "Not that kind. It's difficult cause of your policy here. I'm looking for someone."

"If it's one of our hired staff, perhaps with a description... No, I haven't seen your face before. Llevi?" he called to a lady further back. Please no.

"None of your staff, sorry. I haven't been here before. I'm looking for someone who might have been a guest recently."

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that."

Of course not. “What if this was a matter of life and death?”

He gave me that grin again. “We hear that a lot, too.”

Fucking fantastic. At least I was thoroughly convinced by now that what this policy was in place to prevent was indeed just the reputation of the customers.

I sighed. “Alright. I’ll play along. How do we do this?”

The innkeeper leaned forward. “That’s up to you. Rest assured that if you decide to spend the evening here, any secrets you assemble are in good hands.”

“Isn’t that great. That’s still not what I’m here for. You’re the owner of this place? You seem invested enough.”

“That I am. Raised it from a wreck that its former owner left it as.”

“Fine. Look. Let’s do this here: I won’t tell you my name either. In case I want to change my mind later on and visit, right?” Give them a bit of hope. “I’ll tell you some other things, though. I’m a friend of...” No names. “Someone in Kragenmoor. Best Restoration mage he knows. Apparently more trustworthy than a Psijic mage and a Clockwork... whatever that guy is. Figure that. They’ll know who I am.

“And I’ve been sent here. Just came from Murkmire. I’ve heard all over the place that there may be a couple who are trying to save their daughter. She’s very ill. Some people may have heard of them. I may be able to help the girl, but I’ve yet to actually meet her, or any of the family for that matter.

“If you hear of someone who wants to save their daughter, from a severe illness, you tell them someone is in town and wants to meet them. Tell them to come over to the Mages Guild during the day, or find me around town. I’ll be bringing a very noticeable wolf puppy around next time. Can we do that?”

“Ah,” he said, “you’re...”

I raised my eyebrows.

He grinned. “...a very valued future guest, of course. I’ll see that the gentleman in question gets the message.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you really going to come back?”

Business sense above all. I grinned. “Might well do. I like an occasional club visit, and the discretion does have its charm. But right now...”

“Oh, of course. You can just have a drink, sera, or a few. Many of our regulars do. We have a fine selection from all over Morrowind and Black Marsh, and even mead for the Nords. The Murky Silence Club is a true bastion of communication and relaxation for all nations of the Pact.”

“I know. I usually stick to the drinks. But right now I’m trying to save a little girl, and I’m really not in the mood. Neither for drinks nor for anything else.”

“Of course, of course, I fully understand.”



He didn't seem like he did, but that was fine. As long as he delivered the message.

Frustrating, but perhaps tomorrow will bring better results. The hut is quite alright. I'll sleep now, and tomorrow morning first thing I'm getting my puppy. I miss him. And then I'll be lounging about the Stormhold Mages Guild, I suppose, in the hopes that perhaps someone will deign to let me save their child. This is already more effort on my part than it should have been. Ridiculous.

## Chapter 27

I'm back after fetching my puppy.

Sadis is now the best friend of everyone in the Stormhold Mages Guild. I'm the guy that brings Sadis around.

Sadis is also the best friend of most people in the shopping district. Again, I'm the guy that brings Sadis around.

I have to commend my own inspired idea of having people recognise me by my wolf.

In addition: People talk, and Stormhold is, for all intents and purposes, a village. I'm not used to anyone having an idea who I am, leave alone so many people in one place. It's a little uncomfortable. No Names club has a point.

Given all that, it still took several days till Soravul showed up. I'll just spare this journal our introduction. Kalathys gave me enough hints and enough purposeful polite omission for me to have an idea, and he didn't disappoint.

When he was convinced I wasn't some agent of whatever he thought I was an agent of, he brought over his wife and daughter.

His wife Sethes was indeed more rational but also tried to impose rules on the healing process before I even had an idea what was wrong with the child.

Naronah is the only sound-minded person in that family. She quietly explained me her cough, her faintness, her skin turning nearly translucent in most places but hardened in others (I saw that, but her own explanations were helpful), and what she can and can't eat.

I know it's often the skin diseases for our kind, but I've also been wondering about some obscure strain of vampirism. Which should tell any reader enough about how little of an idea I've got as to what this is.

I did the overly optimistic healing attempt I always do – throw some healing spells on them, with and without staff, milder, stronger, and some light and nature-based ones I've learned. Nothing. Not only ineffective or weak, though. It's simply nothing. No reaction at all.

I asked what alchemy they've tried. Sethes had kept a journal and showed me; it comes down to 'just about everything'.

Other things? Same. Anything conventional or slightly unconventional.

Tribunal Temple I'd already heard about. What specifically? Everything from blessings to solid magic.

Any other Temples? They're Tribunal-fearing mer and wouldn't consider that.

Naronah asked to talk to me in private, saying it was something she only wanted to say to her healer. Showing embarrassment. Sethes understood and convinced Soravul that he'd better understand, too.

Turned out the embarrassment was feigned. She simply wanted to tell me she'd sought out a Temple of Mara and one of Stendarr and one of Akatosh and even one of Arkay in a dark mood. And never ever to tell her parents. Smart girl. But nothing worked.

This is going to be damned hard.

Soravul insisted he'd tried everything. And that he'd heard of a ritual down by Anvil, and they'd be going there next.

After the rumours that Diesala had passed on to me about what goes on down there, I warned them to hold off on the Gold Coast and give me a chance to find something. If I failed, we'd look into other options. And if need be, I'd try to get them in contact with the Psijics or Clockwork City, for all I could do about that, but to please not try any rituals or Necromancy at least.

Told them they wouldn't get religious or Daedric solutions from me cause the Divines and Daedra and I leave each other alone, but I'd look into most things compatible with my ethics, and I'm of House Telvanni.

Sethes appeared grimly reassured.

Soravul agreed at last.

Naronah took me aside again. She said she was grateful, but if she had to die, I had to promise to let her die. And she didn't want to be raised again, as anything, undead or machine or Daedra.

Again, smart girl. Wiser than her parents. The Argonians back in Murkmire would be proud of her. I told her. She smiled a wan smile and asked if she could come along if she was better. She liked the Argonians. I said yeah, if we could convince her parents. She looked grim at that.

I said something unwise. I said, "If you live, you'll grow up, and you can go on your own if they won't let you now. If it turns out you won't live, I'll try what I can to get you down there so you can see it before you die. Some medical attempt, who knows what, we'll make something up, your parents are considering the Gold Coast of all things."

Naronah nodded. A serious nod with big eyes looking at me. "You'll try."

"I'll try. I can't promise. Your parents are... Well, you know. And I'm a stranger. But I'll try."

"Alright." She held out her thin hand.

I shook it. That skin, too. Thin and then rough and thick in patches. I've no idea.

I took my leave for now cause I need research, and since I have no idea after all my reading and education over all these years, I'm taking the one chance and going back to Murkmire. Maybe I'll find something.

At the portal, Dries-The-Pages quietly said, "Good luck. I heard you. You understand. If it's her time, you'll let her die."

"I'll do what I can," I said. And added something unwise again. "Hypocritical of me, all this, when I'm looking into immortality myself."

She erected her crest.

"But I've learned about the value of mortality," I said, "and I know people who value it a lot. My apprentice for one. Much wiser than me, too. That's why she's the Psijic, and I'm here. Anyway, don't worry."

"Good. If you need an excuse when it gets time, or other help, let me know, Telvanni mage." Then she bent down to pet Sadis. "Bring him again next time."

I promised I would. Sadis is the most popular visitor in the city after all.

## Chapter 28

That's what it reminded me of. Tree bark. The irregular kind. Sometimes sickly. Being back in Murkmire hit me with it at last.

I asked around in Lilmoth if anyone had any idea how to help a Dunmer with her symptoms. Then I got mildly desperate and asked around how they would cure a tree with a bark condition like that. I'm convinced they're all convinced I'm crazy now.

Someone told me to find a Tree Minder. Someone else told me to ask the Hist. Any Hist. But rather a friendly one with a lot of patience for helping a Dres girl. I said if the Hist is wise, it won't mind an innocent girl. They told me not to assume the ways of thought of the Hist. But said for the most ojel-friendly people and Hist both, to hit up Bright-Throat Village.

That reminded me. Didn't Xukas want to talk to me about something anyway? Something to do with these incompetent adventurers and the relic. Funny how that slips your mind and becomes trivial. But I might as well combine the two. Maybe Xukas can introduce me to his home tree. If he isn't still sulking about me agreeing with Jaxsik about the bandits.

## Chapter 29

Well, I get here, and right then somebody collapses dead. No one knows what of.

On the upside, I met a Tree-Minder. It's disconcerting what access you get if you say you specialise in Restoration sometimes.

On the downside, this didn't help me one bit. (Also a common theme.) I tried to bring on my questions, but all they care about are the Hist and the bonding ritual.

This being some barbaric custom of politically and traditionally mandated mating to form alliances between tribes, in case I needed a reminder I'm in a tribal swamp society. Reminds me of noble Bretons.

In the hopes of getting some kind of information out of future grateful Tree-Minders and/or trees, I agreed to investigate at the Egg-Tender hut, which turned out to hold some questionable herbs and an impressive collection of romance and erotica featuring Argonians in assorted mixed-race constellations.

I'm only wiser in ways I did not care to be. But my designated tourist guide has an idea of where to go next. Fine.

## Chapter 30

Sorted that out.

That unexpectedly took a toll on me.

But a lady and her ailing daughter have been returned to the Hist.

And they were willing to hear me out now, about someone else's ailing daughter. Tree-Minder, and implied, tree.

I'll get an answer, well, sometime. Long as it takes.

And I'm welcome in the village anytime now. I suppose that's good. They said I should rest, too. I think I will. I think I need some time alone to think or not think. (As if I could manage that.)

## Chapter 31

Tree-Minder Pavu says the Hist says what Naronah has is not a skin disease, and to bring her to it. How in Oblivion am I going to accomplish that? Against those parents?

I asked for more information, but my tree translator said she didn't get any more, but I should hurry it up. Not much time left. In my experience, when the Argonians deem something time-critical, it really is. Can't speak for their trees, of course, but you'd expect trees to be pretty patient types overall.

I met up with Xukas, told him I had urgent business first and I'd be back. Relics have to wait.

Now I'm back in Stormhold, didn't find the family, of course not, why'd they stay around and wait, I'm sure they have much better things to do than having their daughter cured.



## Chapter 32

So I went back to my favourite place, the Murky Silence Club.

The innkeeper's face lit up when he saw me. "You did come back."

"Not as a guest yet," I said. "Business isn't done; I need help again."

He sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"Have you seen any of them around then? I know, you don't want to tell. But this is getting urgent."

His eyes glanced around, and he licked his lips. "Ask another way."

Fucking pretentious nonsense. "So you've seen them. Here, this is how it is. If there's someone who wants his or her daughter cured, or at least get an idea of what it is she's got, I need to take the child to Murkmire, and fast. I'll be at the Mages Guild during the daytime again. And since this is urgent, they can find me at night, too, in my rented hut. Only them. No visitors, no business. It's on the outskirts, near..."

The innkeeper raised a hand to stop me, didn't look at me. "I'm afraid this time it won't work like that. The family... A family matching that description... left to the Gold Coast this morning. They want to attempt a ritual there. Or so one hears."

I hit the counter, wanted to curse but didn't know what by, and then didn't do anything more, cause what can you do?

What could I do?

Reaching Diesala would take too long. I could have the Mages Guild help with portals, but they couldn't help with finding them at the Gold Coast, and searching the whole region for "someone who does some kind of ritual around here", forget it.

Anyone sitting close to the counter was watching us by now. Just great. I thought I recognised some faces, too, who knew if from town or from my last visit here.

I briefly asked Mara for help, but I don't get direct intervention, and I don't expect to, and generally I like it that way.

"Do you need a drink now?" the innkeeper asked.

"No, not yet." What else? Kalathys's other option came to mind, Clockwork City, but if I couldn't reach Diesala in time... Well, perhaps there was another way. "You wouldn't happen to have a Tribunal temple around here, would you?" Couldn't believe I was asking.

The innkeeper nodded as solemnly as he was probably capable of. "Sometimes that's all that's left to us. There is a small temple, but it's closed at this hour. If you want to pray, I can give you a back room. Free of charge today. You can stay overnight, too, it's getting late."

I tried to find the snare in the offer but couldn't detect any for the moment, so I accepted. "I've got my wolf puppy waiting outside the club. Didn't want to disturb anyone. Can I bring him in?"

The innkeeper gave a sad smile and nodded.

So here I am. The back room is... not the typical location you'd find conducive to prayer, but surprisingly silent and secluded. I've got to sort my thoughts if I want to do this.

They always say the Tribunal hear every prayer, and Diesala confirmed it in one of our conversations.

Can't believe I'm doing this.

## Chapter 33

After taking some notes and trying to sort my thoughts, I figured I had to actually start this, uneasy as it made me.

“Sotha Sil,” I said, “my apprentice tells me you hear all prayers but don’t answer all. You’ll want to hear this one. My apprentice is your friend Diesala Tharn, by the way. So, I hear you’re close to House Dres these days. Can’t blame you, I always end up entangled with them, too. So your... partner? He’s got a niece a few times removed, not sure how exactly. Naronah Elaru. Kalathys’s direct niece, if that helps. I know he remembers Kalathys cause Diesala talked about him. By the way, I’m severely breaching protocol by using names in this venue. That’s forbidden. Highly forbidden. And I’m breaching my own protocol by talking to you; I normally stay away from everyone divine except sometimes Mara maybe. So you know how serious this is.

“So this girl is deadly ill, and this one Hist in Murkmire may have an idea what it is, and I’m hoping how to cure her, too. But I have to get her there. And now her and her family have vanished to the Gold Coast for some inane ritual that can only harm her. She’s a good girl. I want to save her, and I’m too invested in this now. And I don’t know how to reach them or get them here fast enough. Tree-Minder said it was urgent. Can you help me? Portal them here, or, you could also just cure her, that’d speed things up, of course.”

Before I could reflect on how stupid I felt, the air shimmered, and then there stood a tall projection matching what you saw of Sotha Sil’s portraits, but without all the regal accessories, just in a simple robe like you’d wear at home.

“I’ll say that’s unexpected”, I muttered.

He looked at me like he was studying me. “So you exist now. Interesting.”

“I what?” Then I remembered. Had already half-forgotten over everything else. “Right, the dragon break. Diesala talked about that.”

“So you know.” He nodded.

“Wait, why would you know or care?”

“Diesala told Salyn to look for you. Before the dragon break. You did not exist in our time then.”

I snorted. Not too surprising. “She really wanted us to meet. Guess she can be stubborn, same as I. So, nice to meet you, then.”

“And you.” He looked around the interior décor of the back room I was staying in, and I think I saw just a hint of amusement. “I assume you don’t need rescuing.”

I grinned. “This is... yeah. Wasn’t my first choice of venue, if you’ll believe it. I’ve been using this cornerclub as an information source and, I suppose, gossip spreading source. Funny how easy that is once you know how to get around the ‘no names’ rule. The innkeeper’s the one who told me the family’s off to the Gold Coast, left this morning. I asked for a temple cause I was getting desperate. He gave me this room to pray in cause your temple is closed. You should increase staff.”

The Father of Mysteries smiled. Then he took on a faraway look. “They’re on a ship. I’ll ask Salyn to deliver them to you.”

“You will?”

“It’s not a problem. Wait a moment.”

The projection flickered and was gone.

I called Sadis over to pet him and calm my nerves.

Then Sadis got hungry, and I let him out, and of course someone in the kitchen is very happy to feed him.

Now I’m back alone in this interesting room, and my nerves aren’t any calmer, so I wrote this down. Now I’m waiting again.

## **Much to catch up on.**

Sotha Sil's projection came back eventually. "Salyn is on his way. He told me to lend you company in the meantime since you'll be nervous, and it seems our mutual friend wanted us to meet in any case." He cocked his head. "I can't say I'm good at these things."

"Neither am I," I said. "That's why she's worried about me. She told me. Cause I'm trying for immortality in my research, so she's afraid once she dies, I'll have no one to talk to anymore. Can't say she's wrong either."

"Immortality, is it?" He mustered me.

"House Telvanni classic, you could say."

He gave me a strange smile. "House Telvanni. In a way, it makes sense."

"What does?"

"Nevermind. I'm merely thinking aloud. And you avoid religious ties like members of your house tend to. You mentioned Mara?"

"Well, habit from childhood that stuck," I said, and at the time I didn't even wonder why I was telling him so much about things I usually didn't talk about, or only after years of knowing someone. "I was raised in a temple of Mara in Cyrodiil."

"I see. You don't know your parents, do you?"

"Common story, isn't it? Yeah. Dropped me off as a baby, no idea who they were. Doesn't matter either."

He nodded, looked lost in thought.

So it was up to me to say something. "You wouldn't happen to have some advice for immortality, without being a god as a side effect?"

"There are times these days that I wish I did."

"Huh."

He gestured like he wanted to say something, but then didn't. Did that a few times. Then he spoke. "Would you say you are happy?"

"No," I said, and only then thought what a strange question that was, but maybe a normal one from a god. Getting to know your subjects? If I can count into that number, which I highly doubt. "I'm always discontent with everything. Are you asking cause I want immortality? You'd typically want that when you're happy and you want everything to continue, right? That'd make sense, at least."

"No, I didn't do it for that reason either. I'm only starting to understand that particular feeling now."

I had to grin. "So I take it you're helping here out of a new-found bias for House Dres?"

He smiled. "Not only. Some things happen to coincide. But of course Salyn cares about his House, and I care about his happiness."

“You’re pretty open and relaxed about that, aren’t you, Salyn I mean; didn’t expect that somehow.”

“I’m learning, you could say.”

Interesting. And he was likeable, and frightfully easy to talk to. “Well, I wish you all the best,” I said, and meant it, platitude that it was otherwise.

“Thank you,” he said, simply, quietly. Then nothing.

“Anyway, nothing like that for me,” I said. “And it may sound paradoxical. I don’t have a big mission or anything either, if that part about you is even true.”

“It is,” he said, “at least that part is, if not much else that scripture says.”

I nodded. “Figures. Especially with Vivec writing so much of it.”

His smile looked resigned. “You and Salyn will get along. And sadly, you are right.”

I grinned. “The problems of gods. But to answer your question... What I really want to continue is myself. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to cease to live or be me or be aware. That’s the most terrifying idea there is. So, if I can continue as myself, it doesn’t matter if I’m happy or not. What in Oblivion, I don’t normally talk like that to people.”

His projection looked at me intensely, then he inclined his head. “A good answer.” He looked up again. “How did you think of the Hist?”

“To cure the girl? I was actually on the wrong track. I was thinking skin disease, like us Dunmer tend to get, some new strain I hadn’t heard of, and the appearance reminded me of sickly tree bark, probably cause I’ve spent so much time in Black Marsh now. And cause I was desperate, I talked to a Tree-Minder about it. After come complications. But their Hist says it’s not actually a skin disease. But to bring her over. So it comes down to sheer luck.”

“I see.” Looking thoughtful again. “Skin disease. One might think of that, of course.”

“Can’t you just cure her? That’d be quicker.”

“I won’t now,” he said. “For assorted reasons. For one, I don’t like to interfere in these outside matters unless necessary. Should it be necessary after all, ask me again.”

“Outside matters?”

“An Argonian Hist has identified it. Don’t you think this is an Argonian matter?”

“But she’s one of your people. She might even believe in you properly.”

“Perhaps.”

“So you know what it is. Can you at least tell me?”

He smiled. “Persistent. Do you know what her father does for a living?”

“You know, I still don’t. Her uncle was a slaver, he stopped selling shortly after I stopped buying.”

He nodded. “Her father didn’t stop. And like Kalathys, he still illegally dealt with Argonian slaves.”

“So you’re saying she caught something from them?”

“Your other early guess was right.”

“Vampirism? Seriously?”

He nodded. “An Argonian strand.”

“What the...” This made me angry now. “She visited a priest of Arkay. And one of Stendarr. Wouldn’t one of them have gotten rid of that?”

“No. One for lack of trying and one for lack of knowledge. It’s a rare strand, and I do suppose the Hist is your best chance. It takes a long time to take hold, so it is still reversible. But it won’t be easy, and there may be lasting effects. I would prefer not to oppose Molag Bal directly at this time when there can be a more elegant solution.”

“Well, damn it all. The specific diet should have made me think more. But it’s...”

“Atypical, yes.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. But you didn’t truly need my help, you had this well in hand, beside the slip-up of leaving this erratic family out of your sight.”

I blinked. That was both a compliment and an unusual criticism. “I thought they could wait at least that long. They said they would.”

“You’re still young in a way, these things happen.”

What was this now? As if I’d been careless about a wild-running clannfear. “You’ve got to be able to trust people not to be *complete* idiots all the time, or to mess up like *that*.”

“You think so?”

I snorted. “Take it you don’t.”

“I’ve lived for too long, and I’ve been... in this position for too long.”

“Doesn’t your partner worship Daedra?”

He smiled. “Just one. I agree that sometimes trust that seems risky is well-placed.”

I smiled back. “Right. See, I trusted you, well, I sort of decided to try to trust you. And that was well-placed.”

“No,” he said, suddenly serious. “But I thank you anyway. That aside, do you think Soravul Erlaru is one such person in whom trust is well-placed?”

“Well... You have a point. Guess I *was* just careless.”

“Don’t worry about it. It will be taken care of soon. They’re returning.”

Moments later, a portal opened into the room, and the wayward family appeared together with an

unfamiliar Dunmer wearing an eclectic mix of Daedric and Clockwork City styles. It wasn't hard to guess who this was, and the guess was confirmed when he grinned at the projection of Sotha Sil and said "Hello sweetheart."

The addressee didn't have to say anything in return, the smile said enough. Kind of cute, I'll admit.

"So," Salyn said, "I bring my fucking idiot of a cousin and his family. Where are we going?"

"Bright-Throat Village in Murkmire. Near Lilmoth. Thank you."

"No, thank you for worrying about my family. We'll be there in just a moment. And Soravul, and Sethes, you do what the tree says, you got it? And no insults. These things are ancient and powerful. If your daughter lives, it'll be cause the tree wants to help you."

"Let me just fetch my wolf," I said, and turned back to the projection once more, suddenly unsure what to say.

"You're getting along?" asked Salyn.

"We are," Sotha Sil said. "If you are, too, and you'd still like to invite him over, you can."

I stared. "That's a big deal, isn't it?"

He smiled. "It is. I'll see you someday. Good luck."

"Thank you. You, too. With... everything? Yeah." I waved and left to the kitchen, just caught Sotha Sil saying to Salyn, "Take care of your family first, this is important. And then come home; I already miss you."

I had to grin. I'd want immortality all over again if I had something like that. And I'm also getting too soft. Time to end this business here.

When I returned with my now overfed and sluggish wolf, much to Salyn's delight, I caught the tail end of complaints from the delightful family about the venue we'd brought their innocent daughter to.

I said, "It's a peaceful venue of communication and relaxation for all members of the Pact." I almost also pointed out that the innkeeper seemed to know at least one of the parental pair very well and was in frequent enough contact with them, but no need to potentially break up a family or ruin the innkeeper's well-kept image of discretion. I *can* play this game.



## Chapter 35

I realised Naronah had been very quiet all this time, which I'd first put down to the disconcerting situation, being dragged away by ship to a strange land again, being brought back by portal by an unusual- and dangerous-looking fellow, said portal leading to the unusually furnished room I was waiting in (dangerously furnished, too), seeing a projection of Sotha Sil, being taken elsewhere again with another portal, all probably without sufficient explanation.

When she looked around in Murkmire taking in the nature, her eyes watered, she bit her lips and took my hand and whispered, "Thank you."

Then it dawned on me. What situation had I promised to take her to Murkmire for?

I'm an idiot.

Still, I couldn't make any promises yet. "It's not as final," I told her. "This isn't meant to be for you to die. A Hist tree actually seems to know what you have, and I hope there's a cure. I don't know if it'll help. But I wanted to try."

Her big red eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really."

She squeezed my hand, and I thought that tree'd better deliver.

Tree-Minder Pavu greeted us and took us to the Hist tree. She started speaking to it. Turned back to us and took me aside with a crooked smile. "The Hist says that you keep bringing us new girls."

I snorted. "You're welcome. But this one's supposed to go back home with her parents. If the Hist could be so kind as to cure her."

"She can't."

"She..."

"She can't go home. The Hist will take her in. You know her condition, beeko, I see it in your eyes. She won't be cured on her own. But the Hist offers to heal and sustain her as long as she stays one of us."

"That's possible?"

"We have taken in another not quite of our kind. If the Hist decides, then we follow, and we will care for her. You brought her to us, and you care for her, and it would shame us to have it be in vain."

So this was the more elegant solution Sotha Sil had talked about.

Fucking gods, fucking trees, fucking vampires. And how in Oblivion to explain that to her, and to her parents? But maybe...

"She's wanted to see Murkmire before her death if she had to die," I said. "And she seems to like Argonian culture. And she's wise for such a young thing. I think it'll work. The problem are the

parents.”

“Let me handle that,” she said and stepped over to the group. “Naronah. Let friend Lothryn explain to you what you have and what needs to be done. As the Tree-Minder, I will speak to your parents.” Putting herself up as the authority. Maybe useful with the type.

So I explained it to her. Plain words, cause I’m not much of a diplomat, and I reckon she prefers that anyway.

She didn’t look surprised in the least. “So it was that,” she said. “He promised he didn’t have anything.”

Misplaced trust again. “Argonian?”

She nodded. “One of the wagon guards. He was young and new. He’d escaped from a cult, and then he was caught. And then he was with us.” She bit her lip.

“Well, I can keep a secret or two for all it’s worth. You think you can live with these people, after that?”

Her eyes widened, and she nodded vigorously. “I like them. Maybe it wasn’t his fault. Maybe it was. But I like the whole culture, I just have to forget about him.”

“That can be hard, you know.”

She looked at me as if to gauge how credible my judgment was. Maybe she saw enough wrinkles cause she nodded at last. “I’ll find someone else, and he’ll be unimportant, and what he did. I’ll live with it.”

“Brave girl,” I muttered. “Alright. They’re good people, I think. Recently took in a girl... Oh, long story. Anyway, I found them too shady and idealistic both when I met them, but they’re generous to outsiders, and I’m coming to appreciate them. You’ll be alright here. If not, write to me.”

She nodded. “Where to?”

“Good question. I have a tower in Vvardenfell, but that’s far away. You know, I like Stormhold. I’ll drop in there, and maybe ask the innkeeper for news. Maybe he stows letters, too. Best write to both. If I get a new permanent place, I’ll let you know. I’ll write you down everything when we get inside.”

“Can I write you anyway?”

I smiled. “You always can. We’re root-kin now, I reckon. I’m told I’m terrible at responding, but I’ll try.”

“Alright.” A small smile crept on her face. “I’ll stay. Can I pet your wolf?”

First time she’d paid attention to him.

Meanwhile in the other corner, the conversation had become loud, but was settled eventually. So she’s staying.

I saw her again after the initiation, crammed in in a hurry around preparations for the bonding ritual.

Her skin is smooth again but lined with faint colours. She looks healthier overall, though her temperament is what it is and that's a good thing, too.

Xukas welcomed her into the tribe and now wants to collect me for relic hunting. I insisted on a day and night of rest, then we'll move on. Might as well.

Salyn's taking the parents back to Stormhold, and then he's going back to Clockwork City. He also formally invited me for visits and said I could always leave again, too. Apparently, that is not the norm. Fucking gods. But I accepted, for sometime. Of course my apprentice was right again; I like them both. Unexpected, I'll say. Or is it really? I don't know. Hard to tell. Maybe I guessed but was afraid she'd be right. That seems closer to the truth. Why, I have no idea though.

I asked him, when he's in Stormhold and has a moment, to tell the innkeeper thanks for his help and I'll be back as a guest when I'm done with some business here. He deserves me at least buying a glass of wine at his establishment after all the effort he went through.

## Chapter 36

Xukas and I got further in our relic hunt, and also ended up helping a charming pair of Dunmer ladies from Vivec City out of the swamp; turned out they know Salyn from when he was around there and were disappointed to have missed him. So I couldn't help but gossip about his whereabouts and love life and suggest he'll likely visit Vivec City again on family business. In hindsight I'm not sure if I was supposed to, but with how relaxed Sotha Sil was about it, it should be fine. Salyn is open about it anyway.

They took it well, one of them said it made sense, and the other said, who knew? I reckon the gossip will spread now if it hasn't yet. Maybe I should apologise. But I can't quite get myself to.

That aside, all business was set aside for the bonding ritual. Naronah insisted I help out since the tribe calls me root-kin and now this was my business, too. And I think she's still glad to have a familiar face around. (As familiar as I can be called anyway.)

On a side errand in Lilmoth I also helped out a pair there for their own ritual in which the former female had since switched to male and vice versa, and now he could attempt courtship again. While that's fine with me, I wondered why they didn't consider that while only one of them had undergone the change. He enlightened me that the point of the exercise was good offspring.

As good a reason as any, I suppose, for other people.

Back in Bright-Throat Village then, I did a whole lot of running around on ridiculous errands for crazy people; if I was the tribe, I'd reconsider letting all that into the blood line, if that has to be the point of it, but the Hist's wisdom must prevail. And after all, their primary motive is diplomacy.

Somehow, we got everyone to agree to take part, and they wanted me around for the celebration, too. It was a nice and fun celebration, I'm not denying that. But this is really not for me. As scarce but disastrous as my choices tend to be, I still insist on making my own choices. This all doesn't sit right with me.

That and I don't like to mix politics and procreation into things, and I fail to understand why one'd want to.

As it had to happen, Naronah got broody partway through. When she was ready, she asked if she could talk to me about something since she can't talk to her parents about this and they wouldn't understand, and also they weren't there. It was of course about the bonding ritual. She's getting used to the tribe in the short time that she's been there, the connection to the Hist probably helps. But she's also realising she won't be part of this.

Side note: Write to Kalathys to tell him to tell his brother and sister-in-law to study up on Argonian culture and move somewhere nearby; their daughter still needs them.

I warned her I'm terrible at this and to take my advice with caution, but to just not worry about the ceremony and find someone else who wouldn't take part in it either, and do their own thing. And to please not let her parents know I encouraged immoral activities.

She smiled.

I added my aversion to the politics-and-procreation school of partner decisions, which probably made me an ill-suited advisor about Bright-Throat bonding ritual concerns, but she shook her head.

"It's good to be reminded," she said. "What are you looking for?"

"Well. Good question. Well, I couldn't say with a straight face that I'm looking for something purer."

Her serious face broke into a little crooked grin. "Who needs that?"

Her parents' comments about their innocent daughter came to mind. Best leave them in the belief. "But I suppose," I went on, "I'd want something more purely... mutual-interest-based, at least. Not mixed with all kinds of complications and factors that muddle the water and distract. You know?"

She nodded gravely. "Should we both look for that then?"

I said, "I don't know if I should be looking for anything. But you probably should. This ritual path is closed to you, that's just a fact. Find out what else makes you happy, and look for that."

"You should do that, too," she insisted.

I sighed. "Perhaps I'll give it a try sometime."

## Chapter 37

One of the more interesting and frustrating parts about the Hist is that nobody can agree on who can hear it and how. Not even Argonians, not even within the same tribe, leave alone between tribes.

It goes all the way from “Any Argonian should be able to hear it, and if you can’t, something’s wrong” to “The Hist needs natural phenomena, the natural phenomena need trinkets, the trinkets need interpreters, and the interpreters need the works of previous interpreters, and in the end still nobody can be sure what it’s saying.”

Usually with such extreme stances, neither is correct. But what would I know? I’ve seen what (I think) I’ve seen, and that’s what I know. For the rest I’ll have to assume agendas and misconceptions. We’ll see where this leads.

Next up I’m supposed to visit Dead-Water Village and meet up with Jaxsik. I find myself looking forward to that. Maybe things’ll be easier there.

## Chapter 38

Of course nothing is ever easy. Not even among Naga.

Why do I like these rigid stoic ruthless traditionalist warrior people so much? They have absolutely nothing in common with me except for somewhat of a disregard for other people's lives, and for my favourites among them, a certain pragmatism. Still, something seems to resonate that has no business resonating cause there should be no matching basis from my side.

Who knows, maybe I was born to a Redoran couple before they dropped me off at the Temple in shame, and some part of me remembers their droning sermons on war and duty. If so, I never want to know.

## Chapter 39

Alright. Here's how this went.

There was a young Naga hero named Kishi who rescued some hopeful young would-be warriors from their own training grounds. For that he was to be executed. Tied to a stake and eaten by some swamp monster. It's good to keep in mind what kind of society I'm in, all new inspiration and nature romanticism aside.

I was able to kill the monster and get the boy out of that situation.

His father pleaded with me to get him out into exile or they'd just try to kill him again. Now Kishi had other ideas. He saw me defeat that monster and decided I should undertake that rite of passage for Naga warriors the old way, and if I succeeded, it'd prove the old ways were better than the current deadly ways.

I was pretty sceptical at this point. This is a tribe of warriors. I've seen Jaxsik fight. I'm not a warrior.

So I asked him what the old ways entailed, and he explained something about strategy and trickery, which I can fundamentally approve of. But what did I actually have to do? Turns out, it includes acrobatic feats as well as the slaying of a giant monster that has a habit of eating everyone, way out of the league of what was supposed to eat him just now. For that one he had to be tied to a stake. The one at the end of that trial has a good change of killing moving fighting targets. But with some well-placed, well-timed arrows and some more acrobatic feats, I would have a chance.

I told him, "Take a good look at me. I'm a mage. I can hold my own against some bush monsters and bandits cause fire always does the trick, and I know a few more besides. But I'm not a warrior or a battlemage or a conjurer or anything else that would stand a chance against something like that. And I'm not dying for your tribe. I may like some of you people, but that's not worth it for me."

He looked crestfallen of course.

"Do you have any other option than me?"

"No. It can only be an outsider."

I sighed. "If I'm the only option you've got, you'd better let that go. Cause I'm not actually an option. Now do your father the one favour, and let me get you out of here."

"He doesn't understand. Our tribe will kill itself this way."

"He doesn't have to understand, he's your father," I said. "I'm not a father myself, but I've got a few young people I worry about now, and who rely on me at least a little sometimes. That's bad enough. I'll get you out of here. Look, there's a lot of world outside this village. Outside Murkmire, too, and it's better if you're entirely out of the way of this tribe, right?"

He was silent, looking hesitant, as much as you can tell emotion with stoic Naga when they don't want you to.

I went on, "My apprentice knows a guy who's a Redguard sword master. Brilliant, apparently. And he's trying to build up his school of fighting again or some such. I can write to her and call in a



favour. That sound good?"

He definitely didn't look happy. But he didn't have to be happy, he just had to acquiesce enough to be alive at the end of this.

"What about my tribe?" he asked.

Like it was my problem now. "Look, your tribe doesn't like to be babied, right? If all they can come up with on their own is how to decimate themselves, then that's how it is. I can help them think if there's really nobody else here who can do that, but if they only let me do that if I kill some monster first, then that's on them. I'm neither dying for them nor forcing them into anything."

He still looked unhappy.

"You say your father is a good and wise man, yeah? Do that for him and live, for Oblivion's sake. What you want can come later. Happiness is overrated anyway."

"This isn't about me," Kishi snapped.

"Then let's go."

He looked at the village close-by, tensed up and said, "For now. For my egg-father's sake."

"Good."

Children.

So we went to Lilmoth without incident and from there I afforded us a portal from funds I couldn't actually spare to Stormhold cause it was the best idea I had at the time.

Rented a hut again, wrote to Diesala. Now we're waiting. Maybe she'll reply that this idea is stupid, but she'll know something else then. She knows everything these days.

I'm showing Kishi the city, cause he's never been in one, so Stormhaven is a good start, maybe just familiar enough not to set him into total shock. And a bit of magic, cause that can never hurt.

He teaches me some basics of fighting with a spear, and some interesting tricks with vines that I'm planning to expand upon with magic.

I realise I really enjoy being back in relative civilisation. Murkmire is an adventure, and I've made some promises there, but it's not for me permanently. Reckon I need the break here.

## Chapter 40

Diesala showed up, and we caught up a bit. Had taken a while to get hold of her acquaintance, cause he was building up some new version of the Dragonguard cause there were rumours of dragons in Elsweyr.

I said, “Maybe they should hold off on the skooma down there for a while. Maybe the dragons disappear then.”

She said, “Abnur and I have been saying the same thing. But Sai insists this is real and he’s building an army to fight dragons. Well, if it’s true, it’s at least more effective than what Queen Ayrenn is doing in her province, which is nothing, but that’s nothing new. Anyway, he agreed to take Kishi in, said they could always use more capable fighters, and this was a gift from Stendarr.”

“Rather from ridiculous tribal structures,” I said, “but I’m happy to let Stendarr have the credit as long as he’s safe and away from Murkmire.”

“For relative ideas of safety anyway,” she said.

“Funny thing is, I think he’ll be safer in any of those deserts fighting dragons than among his tribe. Well. If the dragons were real. He has a better chance against imaginary dragons anyway.”

So we made the introductions, Kishi was oddly timid with Diesala – she’s the real deal now, all regal Psijic mage, not like me – and she took him along via portal. Said I looked like I needed rest and to take some days off.

I should listen to her more often, so I will for once, and do just that. Maybe I’ll make good on that promise to have a drink at the Murky Silence Club, I could really use one now.

## Inconvenient developments

Where do I start? In relative order. Or nowhere. That's also an option. But I think I should write at least some of this down. And then burn it.

So I left Sadis at the hut and went to the Murky Silence Club.

The innkeeper gave me a questioning smile, and I said, "This time I'm here for drinks. The girl's as safe as she's going to be, by the way."

His smile widened. "That I heard. Your... friend in the eccentric Clockwork attire informed me. I was glad to hear it. A lot of people in town were hoping the best for her, but nobody expected her to live. You actually helped her."

"I didn't do anything really. I was lucky I had the wrong idea, but one that led somewhere, and I got a few people to do things. Including a Hist tree. That's all. The biggest credit goes to the tree."

He shook his head. "Nobody else did that."

"Well, now I'm embarrassed."

The innkeeper smiled. "So, do you prefer sujamma, or maybe something Argonian, or..."

"You know what, I'm on a break from Murkmire, I'd like some good old sujamma."

"Right away."

"I overheard you talking about Murkmire and the Hist," someone said, a Dunmer sitting at a table close to the counter. Didn't think I'd seen him before.

"You're interested in that?"

"Not in particular. But I heard of some upstart Telvanni mage making waves in that area lately."

I grinned. "Well, I couldn't tell you anything about Telvanni or any other families, names just happen to elude me. But I've been down there a lot. Going to go back soon, I just delivered a refugee to my apprentice, but I need some days off."

"Are you planning on staying there, then?"

"Oh by Oblivion no, anything but that, I'm getting thoroughly tired of it. I just made some promises, and we're trying to get some relic."

He indicated the chair next to him at the small table. "Do you care to?"

"Thanks," I said and sat down next to him. Maybe a little older than me. Hard to tell, but he had that look of someone whose appearance doesn't completely match an age. I know, because I do that, too, though less so after expending so many resources lately. So, a mage.

The innkeeper brought my sujamma to the table and refilled the other mer's cup.

“Drinks are on me,” said my table partner, “if you don’t mind.”

I was surprised, but maybe I shouldn’t have been. What kind of establishment did I think I was in anyway? The Mages Guild? Shouldn’t let the nature of the conversation trick me. I looked at him once more. Found I didn’t mind at all and said so.

“Good,” he said.

The innkeeper left us with a conspiratorial smile. Fine. Enjoy having been right and having trapped a customer. This is your moment.

We drank, and it burned, and I was reminded I am not used to strong drinks, but it wasn’t unpleasant.

“So, did I understand correctly that you commune with the Hist?”

I shook my head. “I’m only in contact with a Tree-Minder; she’s the one that talks to the Hist. Less interesting, I’m afraid.”

“Delegation is an art form in itself,” he said. “Speaking of, you talk of promises in Murkmire concerning relics. Would that be to those Imperial sisters that have been asking everybody and their mother all over Tamriel?”

“Concordia and Famia Mercius, yeah. They finally found an idiot to help them out.”

“Don’t be ashamed, a pretty smile from a guileless face will do that to many people.”

I snorted. “Believe me, if that could be my type, I’d be a happier man.”

He raised an eyebrow, new interest in his eyes. “An unsubstantiated claim, isn’t it? Do you really think you would?”

“If you’ve got evidence to the contrary, I’m not averse.” I blame the sujamma.

A thin smile spread on his lips. “I see. I may.”

I returned the smile. “You’re right, though, I wouldn’t. I’m aiming for immortality, and that’d be a long time with someone like that. I know I’d get bored.”

“You’re saying some interesting things. What would you say is your type, then?”

“As far as I can tell? Dangerous people that are bad for me.”

He gave a dry laugh. “That’s a predicament.” He swirled the sujamma in his cup and took another sip. “And if someone like that turned out to be good for you instead?”

“That would be more luck than I tend to have, but I’d sure appreciate it. Besides, what works for Sotha Sil can’t be too bad for me.” I blame the sujamma for all of this.

He turned momentarily serious. “Did you say...”

“Excuse me.” I glanced at the sign. “An unnamed member of a certain set of deities. May or may not be local to the area.”

A smile, but a distracted one.

So I went on. “Happened to work with them a bit on this business with the girl. Met the ah... ‘friend in the eccentric Clockwork attire’. It was Clockwork and Daedric both, maybe a good thing our innkeeper didn’t recognise that.”

“Ah. I was afraid he might get tamed too much there, but it appears not.” He looked as if choosing his words. “I caught the gossip, of course. Will you indulge me with more of it? There aren’t many places in which one can exchange such gossip about our living gods with impunity. This is one such place.”

I grinned. “Not my religion, but I understand that. Sure. I didn’t catch a lot, most I hear from my apprentice.”

“An Apostle?”

“Psijic.”

“That would do it. So, you would say their assumed relationship is working out, then?”

“It is, and, well, if that’s assumed... The, uh, eccentric gentleman called him ‘sweetheart’ in front of people, and the smile he got in return – could have lit up the room. And the uh, unnamed member of an unnamed group of gods told him to come home after that business cause he already missed him. So, yeah that assumed relationship seems to be working out as far as I can tell.”

He listened with his eyebrows increasingly raised, then smiled. “Good. Well. Not your religion, you say?”

“I don’t truly have one, I think. Or maybe that’s a lie. I’m not sure myself these days. I avoid any Divine business usually, or Daedric, but I was raised in a Temple of Mara, and I think something stuck.”

“Mara?” He mustered me with apparent amusement. “One wouldn’t usually take you for the type.”

“Neither would I. Wonder how correct that is.” I emptied my cup.

My table partner ordered another round, and we spent the next few rounds talking about a lot, magic, life, Tamriel. Well, he asked me a lot, and I told him a lot about myself; I don’t even know why I’m in such a chatty mood these days. Maybe I’m around too many people who draw it out of me. He only told me vague things about himself, but had viewpoints and opinions to offer that were more worthwhile than boring biographical facts.

In the end it came back to religion, in a sense.

He leaned in, and when I let him, traced his fingers along my jaw, and when I let him do that, too, took a firmer grip. Looked into my eyes. Completely unfamiliar, impossibly thrilling. I knew I was trapped, and I loved it, and he knew, it was obvious enough.

“So,” he said in a low voice, “as a follower of Mara. If I invite you to share a room, will you want to get married and settle down?”

I grinned, tried to meet his gaze though it made me irrationally nervous, too. “That might happen,” I said. “You’ve been warned.” I don’t even know why I said that. Possibilities include a mere joke without subtext, or the sujamma again, or that some part of me meant it. I hope it wasn’t that.

He raised his eyebrows again, just slightly. "I'm warned, then. And you may be right. That might happen if I have my way with you."

I didn't even have a proper response to that, but didn't need one either.

His index finger wandered up to my lips, and I kissed it.

"May I take that as a yes?" he asked.

"You may."

He leaned closer, asked me a few more questions in a lower voice, which I answered as well as I could; then he got up and went to order a room with the innkeeper. I don't know what he said, but we got a nice one. Different from the one I was familiar with due to circumstance. Still interesting, though.

First I wondered what I was doing here, but I'd probably been looking for something like that. Just didn't expect it to find me with such force.

I still don't know the first thing about him. But sometimes you take what you can get. And sometimes what you get is exceptional.

Held on to me and stayed till morning, too. Uncommon, and he didn't seem the type for that. I told him, and he said he usually wasn't either. Looked a little pensive and bemused when he said it.

Kissed me goodbye even.

I'm back in my hut, and I was going to get truly presentable for the day, not just presentable enough to leave the building, but I may need sleep instead.

If I can.

I keep thinking about him.

At some point last night, I was struck by that thought, 'So this is what I want.'

I should leave it at that. Be glad about that knowledge and apply it elsewhere. Instead, my thoughts go back to him in particular. This is very inconvenient.

At the beginning of this entry, I thought I should burn it after writing it out once to get my head clear. Now I don't know if my head is clearer or less clear, a bit of both maybe. And all I want to do is go back tonight and see if he's there again. This is stupid. One doesn't do that. He may be gone, I'll likely never see him again, or I might see him with someone else, which is somehow worse. What's wrong with me?

This is very inconvenient indeed.

## Chapter 42

I tried to talk myself into being rational, but eventually went back to the club that night like the idiot I am.

The innkeeper greeted me with a smile and raised eyebrows.

I was stupidly nervous, approached the counter, could barely speak cause I was afraid of what I might hear. Thought of how I had to do the question. "So, I'm probably about to get my heart broken, but..."

His smile widened, and he shook his head.

"No?"

"Come along." He led me to a corner table in the back, where my acquaintance from last night was drinking and reading.

He looked up, a smile fighting its way onto his features. "You're late."

The innkeeper grinned, looking very pleased with himself. "The young gentleman confessed he was afraid to get his heart broken."

"Well, we can't have that." My acquaintance got up, hooked his finger in the front of my shirt, pulled me close and kissed me. Of course I was trapped again right away. Or more likely, I never left the trap.

"Room?" he asked.

"Yes."

Most of the rest of what I said that night was pleading for something or other, except for the few times I said I loved him. I don't even know. Thankfully he didn't seem to mind one bit.

In the morning, he traced his fingers along the patterns of my beard. "You put a lot of effort into this, don't you? I like it."

I smiled at him, and then just watched him, with that sense that every moment I was looking at him spelled my doom because I was getting in too deep, but I couldn't help it, and didn't want to help it either, I just wanted to drink in every detail of him, come what may.

He regarded me in turn, leaned over me, muttered, "This is very unwise."

"That's an unsubstantiated claim, though," I said.

"You're right, it is."

## Chapter 43

We've been making daily appointments to avoid the misunderstanding of the first time.

Another night. We tried something new, and then in a half-lucid state, stroking down his back, I said again, "I love you," and then a moment later, in a slightly more lucid state, "I'm afraid I love you."

This time he took it more seriously. So did I.

He looked at me and ran his fingers down my cheek. "Let me think what we should do about that. Let me think about what I can offer you, too. Honestly, that is. You deserve that."

I nodded. Then I couldn't help but grin. "Funny, from someone whose name I don't even know."

"Yes, well." He returned the grin but didn't tell me anything further, of course.

I didn't mind. It's not the point, and I already know I'm an idiot.



## Chapter 44

Another morning.

Lying beside me, he said, “I find myself in a predicament.”

“Tell me.” This could be good or bad, but he speaks more plainly when it’s bad, so I was hopeful.

“I want you all to myself.”

A grin spread on my face. “Well, that’s mutual.”

“Is it?”

“Couldn’t you guess?”

He peered at me from the side. “Logic doesn’t have much to do with what is happening here, so I prefer not to assume.”

“By Oblivion, I love you.”

That made him smile his thin smile, and he turned to face me. “I happen to aim for a similar lifespan to yours. The same, if I’m successful. Think about it well.” Then he got up. “I have some thinking to do myself. Will you be back tonight?”

“Of course I will.”

“Good.”

I don’t expect to get much research done today.

## Chapter 45

The conversation at night took an unexpected turn, I'll say that much.

"Have you changed your mind yet?" he asked as soon as we were locked into our usual room. Predictable enough.

I said, equally predictably, "I haven't." And after a nervous pause, "I want you." After another nervous pause, "I love you. May not be logical, but it doesn't have to be. I actually prefer it this way."

He mustered me, visibly took in the answers, thought about something.

Then he said, "I understand you like exotic pets."

"What?"

He just waited.

"Sadis. Yeah. My wolf." I remembered where we were. "Excuse me. My unnamed wolf of Psijic persuasion. My apprentice made him for me."

He laughed, probably more from the tension of the situation than from my joke being particularly funny. "I would think you can say the wolf's name even in this establishment. Well. He seems quite popular."

"He is. He could run for mayor at this point and I reckon he'd have a chance."

He smiled, then the smile vanished. "There's someone who followed me from an outing before we met. I have him cooped up in my quarters at home, but he's imprinted on me, and he shouldn't be without supervision quite as much. I was thinking of letting you have him."

I thought through the strange situation. "Is this a parting gift?"

"It's not intended as one. Unless you decide so."

"Are you actually insecure about this?"

His features twitched. "Can't I be?"

"I want to stay with you," I said. "Didn't actually say it like that, did I? I should have." Nevermind that he hadn't said anything explicit of the kind either, but he clearly had a *different* style of being forthcoming.

He nodded slightly. "Then, assuming not as a parting gift, would you accept a Daedric kind of pet?"

That made me blink a few times. I looked at him, studied him, then smiled. "From you I'll also take Daedra."

He smiled back. "Even though you know nothing about me?"

"I know all I need to."

“Do you?” He leaned closer.

“You’ve treated me well, including when you didn’t have to. So I trust you. So I’ll gladly take a Daedric pet from you, too.”

“You’re saying some things I’ve been wanting to hear.” He kissed me, then pulled back. “Sure?”

“It’s not a spider, is it? I’m not very good with those.”

“No spiders. Noted.”

“See? You care, and you pay attention.”

He smiled. “Well, we’re all in luck; it’s not a spider.” Then he opened a portal in the middle of the room, and said, “Come over already,” and in floated a small round mass of eyes and different kinds of tentacles.

I’ll admit I just stared for a moment, and then the cuteness of the thing won over, and I grinned.

“That’s for me? That’s a watcher, isn’t it? Is it a baby? No, they don’t have babies, do they?”

He looked pleased by my reaction and closed the portal behind the watcher. “It’s a miniature size one. Some call them pocket watchers. He followed me home from Apocrypha, and I’ll admit I permitted it. Their nature is still largely unknown in a number of factors. He seems to have a more juvenile disposition, although his size is likely to stay the same. In truth I’m not sure if I can get him to imprint on someone else, but it’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

“Does he have a name?”

“If he does, it’s unlikely either of us would be able to pronounce it. You may as well rename him.”

“I’ll have to think about that,” I said, “he’ll carry that for a long time.”

“Good. You remember that Daedra are essentially immortal. If you manage to be, too, then you are a good fit.”

I looked at him and back and forth between them. Time to say something. “If he’s got a juvenile disposition,” I said, “we could both keep him. If you want.”

His lips twitched. “The Mara follower is coming through at last.”

“Was there all the time. You’ve been warned.”

“So I was. Although Daedra are not the same as mortals, in some ways they can be surprisingly close. If he is of a juvenile disposition, and we both keep him, he might be upset if we parted.”

“I’d be upset, too.”

“And you have taken the lifespan into account.”

“I have. You’re the only one I’ve met that I want to keep that long. Being, literally, always, in case it needs saying.”

He smiled. “Well, then... I’ve warned you yesterday. I get possessive. Are you very sure?”

“I do, too, and I’m very sure. You’ve got nothing to worry about if I don’t either.”

“That’s only fair. Don’t worry about anything.” He turned to the creature, and his tone changed. “From now on, this is your other master, next to me. This is Lothryn Simero of House Telvanni. I’m extraordinarily fond of him, so you’ll obey him as you do me.”

Of course he knew everything. He’d hinted as much at our first meeting; I’d just been far too preoccupied with everything else to think that through or care. And it wasn’t as if I was the only one who could use the innkeeper’s information.

The watcher floated over to me, looked me over with its myriad eyes and some interesting noises.

“Can I pet him?” I asked.

“You can try.”

So I tried. Gently pet one of the tentacles that was not of the stabbing variety. The watcher blinked and then wrapped another tentacle around my wrist and hung on there, floating apparently contently.

“Good, he likes you,” my partner said.

I regarded him. “There are only a few people I can think of that would bring over something like this. And give a gift like that, I would say ‘casually’, but this wasn’t actually casual at all. So scratch that. Still, not something many people would accomplish, much less care to actually do.”

He nodded, watching me with some amusement showing.

“I’ve met two of those people, so you’re neither of them.”

“Who am I being compared to? I’m curious.”

“Nobody. Nobody compares to you, whoever you are. But the ones I’ve met are Abnur Tharn and Salyn Darovi.”

He scoffed. “That’s what I get for this masquerade, I suppose. Not that I mind the second. I sponsored him, after all. And helped to set him up with a good friend. I don’t do that lightly, especially not in that particular case. Still, he’s rather the student between us.”

I grinned. “That’s enough hints, then. I heard the story from my apprentice.”

“Psijics are an inconvenience sometimes.”

“Oh, she doesn’t tell me everything she knows. She even says that right to my face.”

“Typical of them, as well, I’ve found.”

I smiled. “Me, too. So.”

“So you’ve figured it out. Any second thoughts? Your last chance that I’ll let you out of this arrangement.”

“I don’t care. No second thoughts, I want you. Just to make sure. In case my head isn’t working at all and I somehow got it wrong. Divayth Fyr, yeah?”

He looked amused again. “Yes.”

“Good. So I’ll want to be with you as much as possible, hermit that I usually am, but I see myself

with this, and I'd better be honest with myself here. But we've got two towers. Shall we keep them both and move between them, or..."

"I could say you move fast, but that would be disingenuous."

"We both move fast. Good thing, too." I raised my wrist with the still-attached Daedra. "We've got a watcher. Got to be responsible."

## **A few notes gathered from a few lucid moments.**

We moved over to an Argonian style hut on the outskirts; he just bought it. For convenience. No complaints, as unfamiliar as that kind of thing is.

He actually asked if it was alright or would hurt my pride.

I said, "Pride only comes into play when it would send the wrong message. We're actually involved, so it sends the right message. So go ahead."

He liked that.

Sadis and the watcher get along already. See, Psijics and Oblivion can be friends.

Divayth casually admitted to spying on me after hearing my name come up a few times lately. "I was curious," he said. "What, did you think I had serious business in Stormhold?"

Diesala was the one who told me to stay and rest here a few days. She must've at the very least known he was in town asking about me.

I can't even be mad.

Sometimes it pays to raise a schemer.

He says I should take care of whatever business I still have in Murkmire fast, and he'd wait here and find some work to do, safer as long as my "deplorable state of incompetence when it comes to portals" lasts. If I find something interesting, good, if not, to cut my losses and get out of there so we can move on and find something more substantial to do.

I've got a feeling my years of wasting time are over. In this case I don't mind.

## Chapter 47

Back in Murkmire.

Much as it inspired me, I can't say I currently want to be here.

But I want some kind of result from this, too. And I *am* picking up new ideas.

Ah fuck it, I want to go home. But that'd look weak now.

Then again, what am I even worrying about?

Damn it, I don't know. I want to come home with something impressive. Not terribly impressive, just something worthwhile.

I don't know.

Add-on: I got a visit from something looking like a gloam wolf handing me a letter between its teeth.

From Divayth, of course.

It starts out,

"My dear, it's been a few hours, so I'm sure by now you miss me to an insupportable degree and wish you were back here. You're likely also fretting over every little thing and wondering how to keep me pleased until and when you come home, or questioning whether I'll still be there. Don't fret; I'll be there, and as long as I get you into my bed and at my mercy when you return, I don't care what you bring home or don't. This has never been a business partnership, nor do I want it to be one.

I'll keep sending these to tide you over. Send your reply with this messenger. I thought the form might please you.

And before you ask, I find myself thinking of you, too."

It gets more explicit from there.

Best letter I've ever gotten.

I wrote that in my reply, too, and a lot more that it took me a while to get myself to write down. You'd think I was still a temple student. But this is new.

That wolf'd better not get intercepted.

## Chapter 48

I was at the bar counter, sunken into my evening reading, when I got his reply.

“I couldn’t help but notice in the ink and the pen strokes that you took a long time to write this and frequently interrupted for extended amounts of time.

While I’m in the mood to spill perhaps too much sentiment, it awoke in me a thought that I hadn’t known I could be so touched.

Just wait till you’re back here.

I realise that this letter has the potential, indeed the strong likelihood, of embarrassing you. Which makes me wish I could see your face like that.”

So I replied.

“I see the hypocrisy in the following line, but how can you already know me so well? (Yes, I know I claim to know you enough for life-altering decisions myself.)

In any case, you’re right about everything, and besides, I’ve been resenting this assignment that’s keeping me here all day.

As for the last part.

Here’s where the ink will dry again till I write it down.

I wish you could, too.

I’ll spare you the analysis, yes this is scragglier than the rest, hurriedly written with too much pressure on the pen, and a none-too-steady hand. Make of that what you will, and draw any implications you like.”

His reply took maybe a quarter of an hour to arrive.

“Well, we didn’t last long, did we?

Fine, I might as well see Murkmire, or the corner of it that your inn constitutes, perhaps some parts of Lilmoth should your business keep you there for longer. It’s not as if I had any urgent work elsewhere.”

I was about to pen a reply extending my welcome, but it wasn’t necessary; he invites himself in.

At least the innkeepers are already used to me getting visitors via portal; this is what you get for



having House Telvanni guests, after all.

## Chapter 49

The other day I notified Famia at last that I was back, and later went to the Remnant meeting.

Let it sit for a while, let myself get distracted again, too. Eventually we talked about what this looked like, and Divayth and I agree that this has the inevitable look of damage control, where you don't actually want to get the artefact, in fact the artefact may be a colossally bad idea and best left buried, you just also don't want the other party to get their hands on it.

Of course Divayth offered the position that if it's good enough, you take it for yourself and learn to handle it, and if it's not, why even bother, let inferior people deal with the consequences of their incompetence.

I'm somewhat tempted. I miss Morrowind.

On the other hand, our next step promises a rare kind of vision quest on Argonian plant substances that even knowledgeable Argonians shudder to talk about. And apparently, messing with the Hist directly, or getting messed with potentially. This has my curiosity piqued. I've wanted unusual insight, and this may be finally it.

## Chapter 50

For the mundane:

There was treason, as it has to happen when a group of people are going after something powerful, and it wasn't a surprise either. I know my adventure novels. It never ends well with the one who's a little too interested in getting the artefact.

As for the more interesting part, the vision quest:

Well that was something. Just when I thought this was all getting a little too practical and concerned with concrete problems in the here and now for my taste, and was a bit of a waste of time and hushed whispers and plant material, it shifted.

For a while, I heard the other remnant-seekers comment on what was going on, then their voices faded, and the scenario faded, and instead there was a tree, different tree, and I had much less of a grip on balance or any sense of direction anymore, getting to the nauseating part, colours too bright, smells of earth and wet leaves and mud and decay getting too acute.

Layers upon layers: The scenario before, an Ancient Argonian gave me advice and talked of reality vs vision, and recognised me as something closer to what I am than what the vision wanted to cast me as.

Now? No such waffling around the issue. A voice simply said, "You," and a vine reached out from the tree and wrapped around my neck, and I had a thought like "It's alright, you know, I'd listen anyway," and it responded, "No time," and drew me in – there was nothing holding me to the ground so it managed without strangling me, very good of it, that would have been unpleasant even in a tree vision.

I find I can't convey in words what it said cause it employed more or less than words. Colours, senses, mind textures, seasons and senses of time lines, that kind of thing, with some added words in mixed languages.

If I try to translate, the closest I get is: "You are helping my people, so you're forgiven. If you want to save your people, know when your place is not on Nirn, and Nirn is your enemy. The time is soon when you need to flee. The next barriers need you. When Nirn has calmed down, and if it has not destabilised, it will need you."

I had a sense that the barriers could be related to eras, which would make sense given my ambitions about lifespans but not my status and comparative usefulness to anyone. Much less on a scale of "Nirn".

But I'll keep it in mind. And overthink it forever. I have to tell Divayth, too. He's sleeping, but maybe he shouldn't be.

My watcher is hovering over my shoulder reading, making his little noises; I'm getting used to them.

Just now he hovered down to the journal and tipped his non-stabbing tentacle at the word 'flee'.

I'm feeling distinctly uneasy now.

As I wrote that, he made a content noise.

Alright, I'm waking Divayth up. I'm pretty sure I speak enough Watcher to understand the message here.

## Chapter 51

Divayth wasn't happy I hadn't woken him up before, but he understood the double argument of needing to clear my head by writing, and the implication that I'd taken the watcher's warning more seriously than the Hist's. He liked that, I could see.

But first he also got the watcher's assurance that I wasn't just still on Argonian plant effects.

I grinned and said, "Look at us, we can't get out of our skin, neither of us."

He gave me a grim, brief smile, then he got serious and looked at me. There was a pause.

Then he said, "I've only just decided on you and caught you. And you've agreed to my unreasonable terms, and my difficult personality. Don't even try to deny that."

I interrupted him, "Can I say that, difficult or not, it's perfect for me, and you're the only person that can make me happy?"

His voice softened. "You can say that." He paused, then his voice got more cutting, and his eyes seemed to look all over reality and perhaps other realms. "The point is that I'm not letting you go again. But you don't want to go, I know. Rather, I'm not letting anything tear you away, no matter which force, and no matter what I have to do. Whatever it is, somebody or something just made a mistake."

I got cold shivers all over, and I'd never felt so cared for.

At one point, he gave me a particular probing look. "Who are you?"

"I didn't lie," I said.

"I know that. But what does the Hist see in you?"

"Beats me," I said. "Honestly. I've been wondering the same. I'm really nothing special. I can be good at my research, but most of it ends in failure. Maybe something in the future?" For a bit of levity, I added, "Abnur Tharn called me a hedge mage. He's not too wrong."

Divayth snorted and laid his arm around my neck.

I said, "It's nicer when you do that than that vision tree."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing to get jealous of, though, it was only doing an impolite tree thing with its vine." I made a gesture encircling his neck and pulling at an imaginary rope. "Little time to talk or some such."

"Ah. It seems the manners of the Hist are not much better than those of the average Oblivion denizen."

"I wouldn't know about that, but I'll take your word for it."

He looked me over again. "You've never been to Oblivion," he stated.

I shook my head.

“Would you go if I told you to?”

“Would you come along?” Inwardly, of course, everything was set on alert.

“You’re well-read,” he said, “I assume you would have caught some of the gossip surrounding Morian Zenas.”

I grinned. “I would have, yes. Long ago.”

“And you’re still with me?”

“It’s in the past. You said not to worry about anything, so I assume I don’t have to worry about lingering feelings for any Imperial fashion advice writers.”

He looked amused. “Indeed you don’t.”

“Then that’s that, and for the rest I don’t care.”

He smiled. “Good. Then don’t get the wrong idea. If I drag you to Oblivion, it’ll be to save you. I already know you love me and you’re loyal to me, to a degree that anyone would tell you is very unwise. But I’ll pay it back, and I’m keeping you. That’s my own unwisely impulsive decision. But you’re *my* decision, and I’m rarely wrong, so I will have to trust my own wisdom.” He ran his hand through my hair, then gripped it.

Shivering again, I said, “I know this is a serious discussion and all, but you know what that does to me, right?”

His eyes flashed in a grin. “How could I not? In a moment.” He let go of me and reached for pen and parchment, taking notes, some of them in script I couldn’t read.

I just watched him for a while.

He looked up. “Write to your apprentice. Find out what the Psijics have to say about this. Might as well employ them if we have the access. If it’s easier, tell her to come over. I have some other preparations to make. In the meantime, it may be wise to help those Argonians as the Hist wanted. An indebted Hist is useful.”

“It rather tried to buy me off saying I’m forgiven.”

“Nonsense. What would you have done? Employed a few Argonian slaves, so what? You’re too young to have a record deserving of the Hist’s attention. And in any case, a Hist tree without a grudge is still useful. I’ll be back and forth. Only for hours or days at a time. I won’t leave you alone for long. But if I have to get you off of Nirn for a while and we need sanctuary without the usual drawbacks, there’ll be a price to pay.”

I tried to say something, I don’t even know what, but he cut me off.

“I know what I’m doing.”

I thought about it. What was bothering me the most? “I love you. I want to keep you, too, so take care of yourself, too.”

A thin, genuine smile. Said enough without words.

After a moment, he spoke anyway. “Not a response I ever get. But now I do, I suppose. Don’t think I’ll take this lightly. Now. I take this as your agreement. Any other wishes on costs, while we’re at it?”

“Should it need to be said, be kind to my apprentice, she’s like... something like a daughter to me. I just want her safe on Artaeum with her snobbish husband living out her days being important and far away from everything. You know?”

“Noted. You didn’t have to worry. But I take your meaning.”

I nodded.

“Write your letter. Then we can continue where we just left off.”

Didn’t have to be told twice.

I confess, emotionally I barely know what’s going on yet. Logically, neither, I’m afraid. Will probably come with time. Or maybe it won’t.

## Notes while resting.

This was a mistake. Always fucking is a mistake to listen to your conscience.

Wanted to keep word, to the people and especially the Hist from my vision. It didn't have to warn me. Could have tricked me somehow so I'd do what I ought to here, and then it's nothing to it whether I live or die or some strange other fate grips me. While the idea of me saving anyone or anything of substance is a joke, even if it wasn't, and this was about someone more important, what does a Hist tree in a vision in the middle of the swamps of Murkmire have to gain from anyone saving the Dunmer? Burning patriotism for the Pact? I erect the spine of doubt.

In any case, I decided to repay the generosity and help catch the traitor and find the remnant for the people who seem to have more scruples than the other party.

And where does that get me? A swamp dedicated to Sithis, where if you die here, you go to the Void according to Jaxsik, and if that wasn't specially tailored to my specific fears and nightmares enough, why not throw in a huge and admittedly impressive whole fucking temple to Sithis, filled with ghosts of ancient people blithely sacrificing each other?

I feel sick and I haven't stopped feeling sick ever since we set foot in this area.

I want out.

Well, we're out of the temple, and so far nobody of our numbers got sacrificed to Sithis. Small blessings.

He won't have me. The void won't have me either. Death won't have me. Not now, not here, and not ever, nor anywhere.

I have just ensnared the most remarkable man, don't ask me how, I've got no idea, who is, as I'm traipsing through this cursed mud, looking for the optimal way to spirit me away to Oblivion temporarily so some vague threat of Nirn can't get me.

I can't die here in a swamp.

I've redrawn the snakes on my hand and around my wrist. The ones from that other fever dream. Not sure why. A protective charm? Maybe. Looks similarly crude as the last one, I'm really no artist. Irregular rope-snakes. But it's the thought that counts, right? Whatever that thought may be. Made it sink into my skin as a tattoo again. Somehow I feel better now.

Our current resting place is a village I was in in my vision. With a familiar-looking near-dead-looking tree.

Most of the surrounding trees have vines hanging down.



Hello there.

## Chapter 53

For a moment I wondered if I was still on any of those vision-quest-related plants, or their aftereffects. Turned out whether I was or not didn't matter cause the wood elf materialising in front of me wrapped in two snakes was real.

Unconscious. Little guy as they are, messy dark hair, bit shorter than mine, dressed like I've seen on Maormer. Sep adder around his neck, and a huge ghostly serpent around his waist and shoulders in a few loops. Different from the ashlanders' one I'd met. More like a sea serpent, but also with some unique features I couldn't place.

I looked around. The others were definitely seeing them, too. Not the drugs then.

I stepped closer. Locked eyes with the sep adder, then realised this was probably a bad idea. But it laid its little head on the mer's shoulder, still watching me, but looking peaceful.

Then I locked eyes with the ghost snake, and realised this was most definitely a bad idea. But its eyes slit, and I could swear it looked like it was smiling. Then it tightened its grip on the mer, and I got worried for a moment. Ghost or not. Some things aren't rational.

He stirred, and I could swear he snuggled into the snake's hold for a moment before opening his eyes. The ghost snake flicked its tongue like in another smile and disappeared from sight.

The mer blinked and sat up, adjusted the sep adder around his neck and shoulders. "So the dark elf. You're Lothryn Simero. That's you, huh? I imagined someone ancient and wise-looking, or some huge warlord. You're... scruffier somehow."

What do you even answer to that? I didn't. I didn't have the slightest idea what.

He stood up, looked around. "Where are we anyway?"

Xukas stepped forward and made the proper introductions of people and region and situation. Sometimes it's good to have a trader and diplomat around.

The wood elf took it in. "Huh," he said. "Alright. Well. I'm Riakil. I'm here on Lorkhan's orders." He pointed at an imaginary spot where the ghost snake had been wrapped around him. Then he looked down at my left hand, the one with my incompetently done snake tattoo, and grinned. "I see, I see. So, you've called on Lorkhan for help. And you're wearing a sign even. Good of you. Now I'm here. What are we doing? Entering one of those temples? I swear, I just get healthy enough to walk, and he sends me here."

## **A few notes then.**

Riacil was delighted at the sentient pieces of slime.

I'm getting used to the little mer.

When you're facing down a lot of tree-based opponents, you really want to have a little fire-mage with you.

I asked him if he's for hire.

He said he's not, but Lorkhan helps his own sometimes. And "Aren't you glad you asked?"

I said, "I don't know how consciously I asked. But thanks."

He grinned. "Doesn't matter."

He has some knowledge of the Ayleid matters we dealt with. Some knowledge, and a lot of opinions.

Starting with: "There was one Ayleid guy I really liked. These here are more like the assholes he stood against. Hate them."

I asked him where he'd met an Ayleid, and he said Coldharbour.

Then it struck me. That's where the name was familiar. "You were one of the soulless ones. My apprentice was another."

"Oh Diesala! You're her shady Telvanni teacher! I'm happy to meet you! Good thing I'm saving you, isn't it?" He looked around the temple full of death traps and Ancient Ayleid ghosts. "How in Oblivion were you going to get through this alive on your own anyway?"

I said, "Well the Hist said I had Famia."

He snorted. "The Hist, huh. You sure it wasn't trying to do you in for your Telvanni misdeeds?"

Once one of those damn tree creatures almost got me. Trapped me in vines and held me to the ground, stabbed me with one of those. It was so quick I couldn't even think anything other than being in shock and panic.

"Fuck, no!" I heard Riacil yell as the ground was covered in flames and so was the creature, but the vines held on.

Then they started to heal me. It was clearly coming from them. Or so I thought.

Then I saw the hard, almost solid wooden vines of the creature fall away, and looser, green and

elastic ones were around me, and that's where the healing came from.

Then when I was patched up, I felt one of those vines pressed into my hand to grip. I did without thinking.

"Keep this," said the voice of the tree from the vision. "Try it."

I was beyond confused and couldn't react in time or say anything smart.

"Try summoning it," it clarified.

I'm not much of a summoner. But the vines faded, and I thought of getting that sensation back, and coaxing it out, from...where? That was the question, wasn't it? If it was meant to be mine, my magical reserves? Myself, then?

Indeed that was that it was. I was wrapped up in vines again, and the healing was back, draining my magicka this time. Very interesting. But soon all my scrapes and ailments were healed.

"Riacil," I said, "come over here."

He'd fallen back behind the flames but came over now, staring.

"Come here," I repeated, and when he did, ordered the vines over to him to repeat what they'd done to me.

He grinned. "Thanks. Nice trick."

"The Hist gave me this," I said.

He looked pensive for a moment, then he nodded into the air. "Thanks. I'll take that back, then. And the tone. And the stuff I thought, too. Alright?" I thought I saw him glow for a moment.

Then the vines crept back over to me, and then disappeared.

We got the business done we were there for, too. Here's a thing. Chases and vengeance are anticlimactic. Riacil and I agreed. When all's said and done, it's never the point. He'd know. He's gone against Molag Bal, not some uninspired small-scale villain such as this. He said he got another uninspired small-scale villain out of the way with divine help to save his friend in a presumed future, and that meant a lot more. He also said, "Bragging rights are nothing. Forget about that, right away."

Lots of wisdom contained in such a small mer, after all.

We restored my impolite but extremely generous ally the tree.

And Jaxsik-Orrn is on a new path. That's a good thing. Two worthwhile people carved away from that barbaric tribe of theirs and off to do better.

I wondered aloud to Riacil why they all wanted me to make the choice between responsibilities and who lives and who dies. And wasn't that their own business?

He said, flippantly at first, "You're their tree's friend now." Then he shifted his stance and pursed

his lips, and muttered, “They start doing that. I still wonder why. But I guess it hits you, too, now.”

We can mourn the deaths, though they wouldn’t want us to, allegedly.

But I want to get back to Divayth. And then out of here. I invited Riacil along. He gladly accepted and said I’d made a smart choice, cause as soon as he has recovered enough magic, he’ll portal us over to Lilmoth.

Now I’m waiting.

## **Last night was strenuous.**

And I can't even continue under this heading as I wish it promised.

Emotionally strenuous and headache-inducing. The bad kind.

Let me get some parts down.

Riacil transported us into Lilmoth, and we arrived at the inn I was staying at with Divayth.

Divayth was there, and was in the middle of a vicious argument with Diesala, who was also there, on whose fault it was if I died.

Not how I'd wanted to introduce them.

When they saw us, they both rushed over, and after the briefest of general greetings he was holding me like rarely before and not in this kind of context, didn't let go. Something about that (and probably the exhaustion and overall emotional toll) made me cry, and I just might have noticed the same from him, and look, I'm leaving some plausible deniability for reputation's sake in case this gets read by others cause I'm being a gentleman.

The others left us some space and caught up – I'd already forgotten again they've met before – and I heard Diesala hadn't even gotten my letter yet, she was here on different business, but that could wait.

Anyway, at some point she turned to Divayth with that sheepish grouchy demeanour she gets when she has to admit she's in the wrong, and muttered, "I might have been unfair earlier. I apologise."

He didn't respond immediately, then stroked down my hair and let go, probably catching himself, and turned towards her. "Yes, well, I might have said some things, too, that might have been uncalled-for."

"It's alright," she said.

He grumbled, "Fine, for me, too," and made a dismissive gesture. Then he turned to me. "Were you going to mention you almost didn't make it through a dragon break?"

Made me distinctly uncomfortable. "Right, that. Well, I made it, so I figured I was meant to, for whatever reason I can't guess. Maybe that girl's lover would have broken up with her with nobody there to discreetly remove her Mephala tattoo from the other night."

He looked at me squarely. "I can't decide if you have a particularly high or low opinion of yourself."

"Something of both. Anyway, dragon break. Do you know what happened?"

"Not enough, evidently. I heard some from your apprentice, and I'd figured out some on my own beforehand. But I didn't know about your involvement, and a lot I'll admit was educated guesswork."

“And I bet you didn’t let her get far in any explanation just now, right?”

He smiled a little. “You know me well.”

I returned the smile, then took a deep breath. “Three timelines. Merged. I’m from the one Diesala brought into the mix. The other two didn’t have me. No trace, nothing. Can I ask you something? I know you’ve met Salyn Darovi. You’ve talked about him. He had only the best things to say about you, by the way.”

He frowned and listened.

Riacil interrupted to express his surprise I’d met Salyn and he’d been here. I gave him an extremely short account of our attempts at helping Naronah.

Then Divayth said, “So he’s involved.”

“It was his idea. He wanted to save Sotha Sil from something. Good idea if you ask me, I like him, and I know you do, too.”

He snorted. “By causing a dragon break. No one can accuse me of being timid in magical matters, but that is extreme and reckless even by my standards.”

“And I’m no Daedra expert, but he’s Sheogorath’s champion, isn’t he? What did you think would happen if he fell in love?”

“True, perhaps. I’ve certainly brought a pair together there. Well. And what did you want to tell me? Just this? Do you want me to weigh the value of your two lives against each other and say it’s alright? Because it’s not.”

Despite the sharpness of his tone, I felt a fuzzy kind of contentment at his words. “No, that wasn’t the point, just context. For my point, I’ve got to guess. Now, let’s try something.”

I saw Diesala and Riacil sit back on bar stools watching.

Divayth pursed his lips. “For you.”

“Good. Don’t think. Just tell me spontaneously what Salyn did before you picked him up to go to Clockwork City.”

“Going all over Morrowind playing the hero and upsetting structures. Good work and long overdue in some cases.”

“And before that?”

“Defeated Molag Bal. That’s what made him catch my attention in the first place. With a group of has-beens that includes your apprentice’s husband.”

As I’d thought. “And you know who else did the same?” I pointed at Diesala and Riacil. “Those two.”

I let him piece it together; he’s smart enough.

He turned to me. I could see a flicker of doubt in his eyes, and he kept his look trained on me until it passed, then looked over to them. “It’s a possibility, I’ll admit. But too vague. Only a theory.”

“So you’re from the time Salyn brought. Maybe cause he actually met you by then and he really seems to like you. If they hadn’t done their ridiculous exercise...”

“I get it, I’m not stupid. We wouldn’t have met.”

“And if Diesala hadn’t played along but someone else, I probably wouldn’t exist now.”

He sighed and sat down on a stool at last. I sat next to him.

“Why is he here anyway?” he asked with a look to Riakil.

“We met in the swamp. And by that I mean he materialised all of a sudden, unconscious and wrapped into snakes. Said Lorkhan sent him to help me. Good thing, too. I probably wouldn’t have made it without him.”

His arm wandered around me, and he gripped my upper arm tightly.

I briefly told the story.

“So your apprentice is right and it would have been my fault if you’d died. I told you to go help the Hist.”

I had to smile. “You really want that kind of responsibility?”

“What are you talking about? It should be obvious that I don’t want that on my conscience.”

“No, what I mean is...” I leaned in. Not everyone had to hear this. “In bed and in relationship matters, that’s one thing. But I’ve always made my own decisions for my life, for better and for worse. Usually everyone around me thought it was for worse. You want me to listen to you in uh, outside matters, too?”

He peered at me with interest in his eyes. Then he tore his gaze loose. “You’re trying to tell me this was all your decision and I had nothing to do with it so I can rest easy.”

“Something like that. May also be a serious question for later.”

He smiled a little. “So, you’re endangered, and Lorkhan cares enough to bail you out.”

Riakil cut in, “He’s had to bail me out so many times you wouldn’t believe. And I’ve still died a whole lot. I just don’t die permanently, at least not yet. This condition I’ve got and Salyn, too. Your lover is conservative compared to me, believe me.”

Divayth mustered him. “And you’re the third soulless one –“

“Former soulless one.”

“Fine. And Lorkhan’s chosen, is that right? Makes me wonder about those declarations about a dead god. That seems not as dead to me as they say. Provided you actually speak the truth, of course.”

“Lorkhan wants him for himself and had me rescue him. Cause he was asking for help. And giving the sign.”

I snorted and revealed my hand and wrist, formerly mostly hidden by a too long jacket sleeve. “I drew snakes on myself, for the second time. First time I did on a fever. I had two sets of fever dreams, one of Almalexia and one of snakes. I picked the snakes. Cause something at the time felt



like I should make a choice. That was badly drawn, though, so I removed it. Then I put it back on. Still badly drawn, but I felt I needed protection.”

Divayth’s lips twitched in amusement. “Well, I can hardly complain about your utterly irrational way of making important decisions.”

I grinned.

“Still,” he turned serious, “let’s assume this is not nonsense for the sake of the argument. I sense an upcoming conflict of interest. As you now know, a friend of mine happened to have used the heart of,” he turned to Riakil, “your god, and it’s what grants him immortality. I’m not typically concerned with divine matters nor partial, but what do you propose I make of this? And where do you see yourself?”

Riakil’s eyes wandered to the floor, around the room, seemingly nowhere or to the inside of his mind. Then he sat up straighter, raising his chin. “Sotha Sil won’t be harmed. I couldn’t do that to my brother. Salyn, that is. We adopted each other. So, I couldn’t. Never. Or to him really, Sil, I mean; he’s pretty nice and cute when you get over the intimidating god part. So don’t worry. We’ll find some way to handle this. No idea how but somehow.” He looked into all our eyes in turn. “I promise, by both of us.”

A shiver ran down my spine, not sure why.

Then Riakil scoffed. “What? You said I could speak for you as much as I want to. This is as much as I want to. We’re bound by this now. Better for us to have to be inventive anyway. Can’t stay stale and predictable.”

Made me laugh at last.

Divayth looked back and forth between us. “I’ll take your word then, erratic as it is. So.”

I noticed Diesala was staying quiet and watching me. Like she knew something. When she caught my look, she shook her head.

I addressed her anyway. “You’re all into the guy, too. What’s your take as a Psijic? Lorkhan a good idea still?”

She nodded barely perceptibly, the kind of automatic nod you give while you’re thinking you’re keeping a neutral face.

“Good enough,” I said. “So. Riakil. Lorkhan. Thanks to you both. And I’m thinking...” I didn’t know how to phrase this.

Divayth interrupted me, turned to Riakil as well. “I haven’t thanked you two. And...” He turned to Diesala. “And you.”

She smiled. “Just treat my teacher well, and we’re good. I’m...” She looked shy now. “I’m actually pleased to meet you. I’ve wanted you two to meet, you know.”

He gave her a thin smile. “Pleasure’s mine. He’s been talking about you. Glad he didn’t sponsor an idiot.” Back to Riakil. “Meanwhile, I have to acknowledge I was an idiot who didn’t calculate the risks even close to correctly. You helped out. So I’ll consider you both favourably from here on out.”

I swallowed. This was the kind of god who put stock in snakes drawn on one’s hand. What I

wanted to say would be final. But while I seemed in the mood for final decisions on my life lately... "Riacil said, when we met, that Lorkhan helps his people." I paused, wondered if I should follow it up with something, but the little wood elf already smiled at me, jumped off his bar stool, walked over to me and stood in front of me.

"I was right, wasn't I?" he said.

"You were."

"Won't make your life easier. But something more..." He was clearly looking for words.

"I accept."

He beamed at me. "Then welcome."

Divayth shook his head. "You still won't tell me who you are, will you?"

"Nothing more than last time you asked," I said. "I'm a hedge mage. And I'm starving."

We turned towards dinner.

Turned in for the night soon after that. Well, Divayth and I did, the other two stayed at the bar drinking and talking.

I could tell he was in thought; he kept getting up and taking notes of something. Wouldn't tell me yet, complex thoughts forming in his head need time on their own, I've learned.

Held on to me when he wasn't writing and when I drifted off to sleep.

It's early morning, and I'm writing all this out, and I'm starving again. May get something at the bar; Divayth needs his sleep to settle his thoughts. He neglects that too often, same as me. But with all this, I want him to come up with the best he can.

## Chapter 56

When I went out to the bar counter, not looking my best, but tolerable, I heard Diesala's voice, so I followed it. She was talking to the door of another room.

"It's early," Riakil's muffled voice was complaining behind that door. "Do you know what I went through yesterday?"

"I'm not trying..." Diesala started, but now he was on fire for complaints; I've seen that yesterday at the Temple. No stopping that.

"I just got through a fever," he said. "Got better. Walked into a Maormer camp. Almost had them talked into taking me on their crew, got interrupted by Lorkhan, we've got to rescue a follower he wants. Dematerialised right there, knocked unconscious, woke up in a fucking swamp in Murkmire. Right next to a fucking Sithis temple on Sithis ground. You know what that does to you? Talked to your teacher. Now that was the low-strain, low-magic part of the whole venture, I haven't even gotten started yet."

"I think I get the idea," Diesala said.

"No you don't. So. You know where we were going? A fucking Ancient Ayleid temple. With fucking Ancient Ayleid portals in it. You know what those do to your magicka? And those are the peaceful part of it. I had to carry this fucking group through this fucking temple raid. You know who stayed behind? The warrior. And the other guy. You know who came with me? Your researcher bookworm teacher, and a fucking Imperial antiquarian who's probably never seen a weapon in her life unless it's in a showcase. You know what we were up against? These lurcher-like things, but vicious and scary. And slimes! Sentient slime pieces! They fought! Alright, I kind of loved those. But dangerous anyway. And slime pieces with skeletons in them! And you know what else? Elite Ancient Ayleid undead! And an Argonian that turned into one of the tree monsters and was powered by some ancient artefact! And you know what I did when that was all over? Took a portal to Lilmoth to bring your teacher back here. You know when I learned portal magic? Just a few months ago! I think. Time did a funny thing then. Anyway, I'm fucking drained, and it's fucking early in the morning."

"I'm not asking you to use magic," Diesala said. "I'm asking you to come out and talk."

Silence then.

I bit back my laughter.

There were rustling sounds, and then the door opened, and a dishevelled wood elf stepped out.

"Morning," Diesala said.

"Morning," he grumbled. "So what's so important?"

"Who did you sacrifice?"

"What? Varen."

"So did I," she said. "And Salyn?"

"Sai."

“Sai, huh.”

Riacil stretched. Didn't make him look any taller. “Didn't connect as much with him, and he wanted to give Varen a chance at... something like reconciliation with himself.”

My apprentice blew a strand of hair from her face. “An actually good reason.”

“Yeah, unlike me.”

“Or me.”

“And Lyris was his Nord pal from day one. He's got a thing for Nord culture, and was real grateful to be rescued, so they stuck together.”

“Another good reason. I just kept her around for Sai, it was strained between us. I just had to make some decision, no matter which.”

“Same for me,” Riacil said. “Lyris would have felt wrong, the others... Could have thrown a dice.”

“So Salyn gets his wish, it seems.”

Riacil frowned at that. “He does?” He looked around and saw me. “Hey. Morning.”

Diesala turned around. “You're getting sneaky. Morning.” She smiled. “Well, let's discuss this over breakfast.”

So we did. And I finally learned why she was actually here.

“What Divayth told me about the warning you got makes me worried. I think we'll need to take more action than we have been. I'll bring it up as soon as I'm back home. For now...” She tapped her index finger against her lips. “Let's start somewhere. There's no good start, it's convoluted. The Argonian boy you had me pick up. Kishi.”

I frowned. “Kishi? What's he got to do with anything? He didn't turn to darkness on your island with all the artefacts and magic, did he?”

“No, no. He's fine. See, I told you Sai had heard rumours of dragons in Elsweyr and was building a dragon guard imitation of sorts. And that he'd agreed to take in Kishi, too.”

“Yeah.”

“Good, at least you remember, and I'm not going crazy. Abnur remembers, too, and how we were joking about dragons in Elsweyr, and how they should have less sugary drinks if they were seeing dragons.”

“Same joke I made.”

“Precisely! Good.” She honestly looked relieved.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

She looked around. Out of reflex, so did I.

Riacil was sitting by next to us, listening.

I saw the door to my and Divayth's room open a slit. There was a blue light emanating from inside. When I concentrated, I could hear pen scratches. Awake and listening in. I smiled a bit, then turned back to Diesala. "Come on. You're not crazy, we've established that. Despite making Sheogorath into your uncle. Tell us."

"Alright, might as well. See, I wanted to drop Kishi off with him. Wasn't there. The region was a ruin. Kasura, his teacher, was there. She saw me and came up to me like she hadn't seen me in a while and laid her hand on my shoulder, like so," mimicking a heavy grip of solidarity and an exaggeratedly grave look, "and thanked me for coming by, and said she was proud Sai got to give his life for a worthy cause and she understood. Then she looked confused all of a sudden and asked if I'd had helpers, two elves maybe, or if I'd been the helper, her memory wasn't what it used to be."

I whistled (badly).

She went on, "There was no dragon guard. There were no dragons. No one had heard of that. I went home to Artaeum with Kishi in tow. Everyone was unsure. Abnur and I went unsure. Kishi was unsure. But he was excited at the idea of fighting dragons."

"He would be," I said.

"He would be. Then Loremaster Celarus took Abnur and me aside and said there'd been a breach in the fabric of time, with dragons attempting to come through. He'd patched it up. He seemed confused himself, but something to do with probability and possibility. And dragons and time. He was muttering. We have a lot of work ahead. I'd thought we'd been competent, but apparently..." She pursed her lips. "In any case. If you receive threats about Nirn, take them seriously and leave. I actually don't want you on Artaeum. Because I don't want to expose you to more instability. Too dangerous. You might go to Clockwork City... You get along with both Salyn and Sotha Sil, don't you?" She looked guarded at that.

"I do, don't worry. I like both of those a lot. You were right again, of course."

She gave me a smile, both strained and relieved. Either more she's not telling me or just this time business taking its toll on her.

She continued, "Maybe a little too close to Nirn still. But you happen to have a lover who..."

"Wants us to go to Oblivion, yeah."

"Oh, good. At least he's not idle. That makes this easier. Don't sell your soul to anyone, alright?"

"But I just did last night, didn't I?"

Her and Riakil grinned.

Diesala said, "That's not selling, that's just common sense. If you and Divayth are actually serious, you know, about each other make him follow up; should you die after all, I want to see you all in Sovngarde."

Divayth's voice came from our room, "A sales pitch early in the morning. You people are worse than Stendarr worshippers."

I grinned. "Excuse me." I got up and went to our room.

He met me halfway out the door and kissed me. Ran his fingers through my hair. "To keep you as

long as I possibly can... I'd consider it. And it can be a strong defence against Daedric claims on you, which will come, trust me. You weren't completely unwise there."

I wrapped myself around him, and he sighed and held me close.

"You'd be welcome," Riakil said from the counter. "You're the kind of unexpected prize you don't consider, and won't even bother asking, but definitely want."

"Worse than Stendarr's, didn't I say so?"

Back at the counter, now with all four of us, Diesala turned to me once more. "There's a more practical thing. Now that there may not be a dragon guard and hopefully no dragons, if we succeed in patching this nonsense up – and we'll have to if this affects you, because I'm not losing you – well, I have a young Argonian warrior on my hands now and no idea where to put him. I don't suppose back to Murkmire is an idea?"

"Well Jaxsik has her own tribe now, and she might be trusted, she's from his home tribe, but no, I don't want him back here. His old tribe is everywhere, and if they find him, they'll kill him."

"Thought so." She looked into the group. "Any ideas on warrior cultures?"

Riakil pondered over his fork. "He's not much of a pirate, is he?"

"Too righteous," Diesala said. "Principles, heroism..."

"Make him a Psijic," I said.

Diesala blinked. "I'm not sure..."

"He can read. Even looks at books. Thinks for himself in a tribe that certainly doesn't put an emphasis on training that. I can't even stress enough how much of a euphemism that is."

"Are you joking?" She sounded thoughtful.

"Only partly."

"Good. Because... Hmm."

Divayth muttered to me, "They really do take anyone these days."

## Chapter 57

So, while Diesala was going to take Riacil home, we got some more time to rest at the inn, which was badly needed. Divayth commented that my people were more strenuous than a pack of Dremora, and at least those were predictable. I think he likes them, though. But I also think he needed time off now to think, and was grateful to have some hours to himself to plan questionable deals with Oblivion.

The greatest honour was when I offered to read at the bar so he could think in peace, and he said, “You can stay. I find that soothing.”

So I stayed.

Diesala returned in time, and with this being her, it ended up with her having enlisted the temporary aid of Riacil, his Dunmer Necromancer banker, and a Maormer pirate captain while she was at it. Sometimes I pity the Psijics.

We spent some more time catching up and making plans while her new allies made their preparations in their respective places. It was easier this time. Everyone alive, and able to relax a moment. And sharing certain values. It can be a good thing to spend time only within one’s chosen Great House once in a while. Or at least select members. There are things you can say that you’d have to explain or qualify or censor elsewhere.

Besides, I suppose this is as close to family as I’m going to get. In a sentimental mood, I actually said as much. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. But they both looked remarkably pleased.

Divayth said he is perfectly capable of creating a portal to get us home, but Diesala wouldn’t hear it. She insisted he preserve that energy to get a flawlessly working one to whatever realm of Oblivion we’d be going to, since we should be going very soon; she intended to resume her work as soon as she was back on Artaeum with her new allies, and if this phase was dangerous for me, I had to be gone for now.

He actually took her point.

We’re not wasting any time looking in on unused houses or picking up anything we don’t need.

We took one detour with Diesala to a specialised House Telvanni tailor that Divayth insisted on; Mistress Varethi knows Oblivion and its specific dangers and makes functional clothing and armour for those none-too-few of our House that venture there.

Before we entered her workshop, he said to me, “Don’t even think of trying to pay for any of this; you can’t. And what I get back from you is that I get you. That’s enough.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that, so I agreed and kissed him.

He grabbed the back of my neck and deepened the kiss, then he whispered, “good,” and kissed me again.

From the corner of my eyes I saw Diesala’s grin. A little mortifying, but I can learn to live with this.

As Divayth negotiated with Mistress Varethi on what I needed (everything, apparently, and plenty of it to stay a while) and a few new things and replacements for himself, I also found out what he was planning. The obvious one.

Diesala was delighted at the selection and got a few things for herself and her husband. I commented on how that’d look to her order. She said, “Oh, they’ll get over it.”

She had an animated chat with the tailor on fashion and its magical components in different cultures and orders, and I think they’re best friends now.

We’re in Divayth’s tower right now, which is truly impressive and beautiful to me, and which I’d like to explore, but we don’t have time for that either.

Diesala voiced her admiration and said she’d wanted one of these, except decisions took her elsewhere after all.

Her and Divayth are getting along quite well by now; he invited her over for another time, “as quasi-family, I suppose.”

She hugged me goodbye and insisted a few times I take care of myself, and if I get in real trouble, to send Sadis, cause he’ll find her. Apparently that’s a well-kept secret, but she regrets not breaking it earlier. Could have made some things easier.

I grinned and told her it’s alright, she can stick to her order’s rules at least some of the time.

But she taught me how to send him, and I guess I feel a bit more reassured.

Divayth’s preparing our expedition now.

Can’t help but be excited. About Oblivion of all things. I told him, and he shot me a thin smile and said that’s how it always starts, but he’d be there to watch out.

Then he pointed to my tattooed hand. “The Serpent sign, isn’t it.”

I looked again. “You’re right it is. Just made of snakes, not stars. Didn’t even notice.”

He shook his head. “Honestly.” Pursued his lips. Held out his hand. “I can use some watching over, too, this time. Would you?”

With a grin I took his offered hand. “Naturally. I’m warning you, though, I’m no artist.”

“I can tell from yours. Doesn’t matter.”

I kissed his hand and got to work.



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